

The Rhetoric of World-Building

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“I can see myself sitting on my dust heap
making a world in my mind as surely as God
created this one. But God saw his world. I’ll
never see mine except—this way.”

– Samuel Hamilton in *East of Eden*
(John Steinbeck)

“‘For God’s sake,’ the dog is saying, ‘open
the universe a little more!’”

– Albert Corde in *The Dean’s
December* (Saul Bellow)

Introduction: Why This World?

“Now what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts.” Thus speaks Thomas Gradgrind at the beginning of Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times*, a statement that signals not only the novel’s thematic interests in education but also Dickens’s broader ambition to construct a world like his own (albeit one with an allowance for Dickensian caricature). By contrast, the first page or so of most editions of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* presents a map of a fabricated land, and the jacket summary in my edition begins, “Bilbo Baggins was a hobbit who wanted to be left alone in quiet comfort. But the wizard Gandalf came along with a band of homeless dwarves.” It’s clear at this prefatory outset that Tolkien’s world radically departs from reality. Squirming somewhere in the middle is Franz Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, awakened as a bug in a world otherwise unchanged and ordinary; it can’t be *our* world that permits such a metamorphosis, but Kafka purports it to be. As these examples suggest, fiction has the powerful capacity to imitate reality, to deviate from it, and to alter particulars as authors please, by turn offering the reader an interaction with a fictional world either similar to or different from the world in which she sits with the book.

Narrative, by any reasonable definition, entails at least one *event*, or “something that happens or takes place” (OED3). Event, by any possible definition, poses two requirements: a stretch of time during which to occur and a space through which to unfold. The second requirement provides the motivation for the present study—namely that the world in which to set a story must be among the first creative decisions an author makes, and, as such, these decisions can serve to productively differentiate fictions and partly account for the unique experiences that

different narratives afford. In the three chapters and conclusion that follow this introduction, I unpack a variety of world-building decisions and their consequences for readerly experience.

Because of its attention to the aesthetic, affective, ethical, and cognitive features of the reading experience, I situate my approach within what James Phelan calls a “rhetorical poetics of narrative.” The default rhetorical definition of narrative, “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion for some purpose(s) that something happened,” can be distilled down to the notion that narrative is “a multidimensional purposive communication from a teller to an audience”—or, even further, that a teller designs a story in order to persuade an audience into taking up a certain position. That design consists of what Phelan calls *resources*, which include (for example) style, character, and plot dynamics. Rhetorical theory posits, moreover, that the narrative act develops in a recursive “feedback loop” among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response (*STSE* 3-5). What this means is that an author designs a set of textual phenomena that a reader experiences and interprets and then uses to make a judgment of the author’s design; in turn, the way readers respond or are expected to respond strongly influences authors’ decisions with their designs. Because each part of the loop both affects and is affected by the other two parts, an analysis of a given story can begin with the text, the author, *or* the reader and move forward from there. The goal of rhetorical reading is to do as much justice as possible to the complex relations among authors, resources, audiences, and communicative purposes.

My investigation here takes as its starting point a particular textual phenomenon, *storyworlds*, or the worlds evoked by narratives. More specifically, I’m interested in what role(s) storyworld-building plays in the rhetorical construction of narrative communication. Thus I ask:

[1] *what is it like* to read a story set in one kind of world as opposed to another?; and [2] *for what purpose* might an author choose to build one kind of world, and thereby provide one kind of experience, as opposed to another kind of world and another kind of experience? The first step toward answering these questions is to articulate how worlds vary across stories, a variation I define based on storyworlds' difference from or similarity to the actual world. All storyworlds, I contend, can be placed on a line strung through three points: at one end, a *primary world* is a storyworld that matches the actual world in every important way; at the other end, a *secondary world* shows significant difference from the actual world by containing a substantial number or degree of impossible or extraordinary phenomena; between the two lies the *hybrid world*, which resembles a primary world except that it contains one or few impossible or extraordinary phenomena. Rather than claim that every storyworld fits neatly into one of these three categories, I propose a continuum running from primary to secondary (say, from historical fiction to hard fantasy) on which every world can be placed. Furthermore, the continuum continues infinitely in either direction so that storyworlds can become more and more and less and less like the actual world both as we consider more narratives in terms of their worlds and as authors continue to push the limits of world-building mechanics (though it's possible that at some point a primary world would become nonfictional and a secondary world would cease to be recognizable as a world). Our way in, then, is to apply the research questions above to multiple points on the continuum in hopes of determining whether different storyworlds provide qualitatively different reading experiences and/or invite significantly different interpretive stances simply by positing such worlds. The general hypothesis I take to this inquiry is that authors build storyworlds to guide the experiential and interpretive responses of their readers.

But before I begin asking these questions about individual texts I need to assemble an apparatus of terms and systems that allows me to track, examine, and interpret various aspects of the reading experience. I spend chapter one in a dialogue with a number of theorists, among them Phelan, Wayne Booth, David Herman, and Peter Rabinowitz, in an effort to more fully define authors, readers, and storyworlds and the interactions that transpire between them. The sketch with which I emerge forms the basis of my analytical method, the key points of which are that [1] the reader is split into two parts, the authorial consciousness (committed to the laws and norms of the actual world) and the narrative consciousness (committed to the laws and norms of the storyworld), and [2] the accordance or discordance between the narrative consciousness's observations and the authorial consciousness's beliefs can alter the relationship between the consciousnesses and thereby affect the reading experience.

In chapter two I turn to case studies of the primary- and secondary-world ends of the continuum; I approach these studies in the spirit of what Phelan and Rabinowitz call "theory-practice," or "inquiries in which theory aids the work of interpretation even as that work allows for further developments in theory" (*STSE* 4). In other words, my goal is to perform interpretive readings of individual texts that simultaneously allow me to test, revise, and put forth broadly applicable theoretical principles. I begin with Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, first defining *realism* in terms of a relation between storyworld and actual world then examining the ways in which Smith establishes a clear and certain accordance with the actual world and thereby builds a primary world. After assessing the qualities of primary-world reading and the particular communicative purpose that Smith's storyworld serves, I move on to Salman Rushdie's secondary-world novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. My elucidation of *Haroun* is often comparative, which lets the

experiential differences between primary and secondary worlds surface naturally: whereas Smith's realism urges us to apply our actual-world understanding to every element of the narrative, Rushdie's fantasy directs us *past* the particulars to the general, even universal thematics dealt with in the story.

Theory-practice continues in chapter three as I move to the center of the continuum with F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button." This chapter pulls from the principles established in relation to Smith and Rushdie to gauge what occurs when a narrative offers the reader aspects of both the realist and the fantastical. I spend the most time here, with the hybrid world, because in some ways it both provides a more complex experience and serves a more complex rhetorical purpose than do either the primary or the secondary world. By situating a single unresolvable extraordinary instability within an otherwise insistently ordinary world, Fitzgerald places the reader in what feels like a destabilized reality, forcing her to see freshly and perhaps reevaluate that foundational assumption which the extraordinary phenomenon violates. As a result of this arrangement, hybrid-world narratives exercise a uniquely acute capacity for challenging what we know, think, believe, and value about the world: hybrid worlds have provocation and stimulation inherent in the very structure of their storyworld.

In conclusion I briefly survey how the three modes dealt with throughout the paper—realism, fantasy, hybridity—interact in some storyworlds at other places on the continuum. My contention is ultimately that the interpretive method I employ in this essay is useful not only for reading the narratives discussed here but for grasping the rhetorical role of world-building in the broadest sense.

Though I will address, directly and obliquely, reasons why world-building matters throughout my analyses, I want to reiterate before we begin the principal payoff of storyworld study. As Salman Rushdie puts it in a remark we'll return to in time, "We are storytelling creatures, you know, we're the only species on the planet that does this very weird thing of telling itself stories in order to understand what kind of a creature it is" ("VermontReads"). Perhaps apart from utmost experimentalism (Beckett at his most inscrutable, maybe?), all stories evoke a space—a world—through which they unfold. What we talk about when we talk about storyworlds, then, is a fundamental facet of a fundamental facet of our existence. Understanding the first link in that chain might well send ripples of understanding down the line.

I: The Apparatus: Readers, Authors, Storyworlds

There seemed to be a dual consciousness running in him.
He was thinking vigorously of something he read . . . and
at the same time his eye ran over the surface of the life
around him, and he missed nothing.

—D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*

We go wrong to leave a concept like “experience” unquestioned, unbroken into more fundamental components. The present study professes to be an examination of the reading experience as it’s affected by the different worlds in which narratives are set. So I’m to track variation—but how? That is, how can I account for and explain macro experiential differences in a way that does justice to the intricacies of narrative processes? *Micro* elements, of course, are the answer. My approach is rhetorical; the rhetorical *experience* of narrative—as previewed by the definition of rhetorical narratology in my introduction—involves three major parts: a reader, a narrative or a set of textual phenomena, and an author or authorial agency. These three parts interact in meaningful narratives to challenge, reinforce, or otherwise engage our beliefs, ethics, emotions, cognition and aesthetic values. In this chapter I attempt to form working definitions of *reader*, *author*, and *storyworld* (my focal textual phenomenon) by engaging with a few of the theorists who have most compellingly addressed these terms. The resulting model posits the *reader* as a single figure with two “consciousnesses” in constant interaction: the authorial consciousness is grounded in the actual world, while the narrative consciousness is immersed in the *storyworld*, or the physical and ontological landscape that houses and includes the figures and events of the narrative. The storyworld is created by an *author* in an attempt to communicate something to the reader. Constructing this three-part mechanism is prerequisite to chapters two and three, wherein I examine the interaction between the parts in particular narrative situations.

My conception of the reader is a manipulation of Peter Rabinowitz's work on audiences. In "Truth in Fiction" Rabinowitz begins by laying out the double-consciousness inherent in every reading of fiction that permits the events of a narrative to be "both 'true' and 'untrue' at the same time" (125). As critics who long predate Rabinowitz—he cites, as he often does, Walter Ong and Walker Gibson—have discussed, literary reading requires that we both entertain the fictive content of the story as if it were real *and* remain aware that it's fictional within the actual world; it's this arrangement that allows us to experience fiction as something apart from a lie. I imagine even inexperienced or uneducated readers intuit this double-consciousness, even if they never consider or articulate it. But Rabinowitz's theory is innovative because he splits each of the two reading selves into an *additional* two more precise entities, yielding four "audiences," which I'll outline here.

Most concretely, the [1] *actual audience* is the flesh-and-blood reader. "It is the only audience which is entirely 'real,'" meaning that it exists independent of the artwork (126). Because of this independence, the author has no control over the actual audience and so postulates the [2] *authorial audience*, the "specific" actual audience for which a work is intended. The authorial audience's existence is hypothetical, the body of knowledge and set of beliefs that best allow the reader to experience the fiction as its author desires, but it is, at least in theory, possible to attain this knowledge and these beliefs, especially because the author bases them in part on her knowledge of actual readers. Indeed, in many cases we are poised to understand a text to the exact degree that we fulfill our potential to become the authorial audience. For instance, if we're to properly follow *Don Quixote*, we must have at least a vague familiarity with novels of chivalry; if we want to recognize the significance of many scenes and

symbols in *Ulysses*, it helps if we've first read the *Odyssey*. A given text's authorial audience has all the qualities necessary for understanding it—thus the authorial audience is the optimal version of the actual audience, as determined by the author from whom comes the work.

Rabinowitz calls the audience that's ontologically analogous to the work itself the [3] *narrative audience*. This audience takes up, in James Phelan's words, "an observer position within the narrative world" and thereafter witnesses the events of the story (*EF* 4). It's this part of the reader that believes for the duration of *War and Peace* that Andrei Bolkonsky and Natasha Rostov are real and that on New Year's Eve, 1809, they turned their first waltz at a grand dignitary's ball on the English Embankment and so on, according to Tolstoy's narrator. Such belief is painless in fictions like Tolstoy's whose inventions are plausible versions of reality, but even Tolkien's fantasy and Wells's science fiction demand that the reader project a witness into the world of the narrative: joining the narrative audience is, Rabinowitz says, "the first and most elementary step" in literary interpretation—and, I would add, in literary experience (133). Naturally, just as the author has a model actual audience, which we've called the authorial audience, the narrator has a model narrative audience, which Rabinowitz calls the [4] *ideal narrative audience*. This audience "believes the narrator, accepts his judgments, sympathizes with his plight, laughs at his jokes even when they are bad" (134). The ideal narrative audience is effectively the narrator's chorus of *yes men*. I suspect (and Rabinowitz begins to admit) that this notion is an attempt to account for those moments when the narrative audience recognizes disparity between what it can discern about the story and what the narrator tries to persuade it to believe—in short, unreliable narration. In such cases there is a naive (ideal) narrative audience

contrasting with the savvy one that recognizes unreliability as well as some ironies and other such devices.

So, all together, Rabinowitz's theory maintains that any interaction between reader and narrative entails four audiences: the actual audience is the flesh-and-blood reader with the book on her lap; the authorial audience is the best-equipped actual audience and the target for which the author aims; the narrative audience is the observer within the narrative world who treats its figures and events as if they are real; and the ideal narrative audience is the audience that believes and humours the narrator without consideration for possible faults in truthfulness, perspective, judgment, interpretation, et cetera. Perhaps most importantly, these entities are simultaneous. We do not pivot from one to the other but allow all four to work at once; for Rabinowitz, reading is just that complex.

For my purposes, however, I will compress the model back down to two parts. First, I want to refer to the actual and authorial audiences as one unit within my terminological framework. It's important to maintain awareness of the theoretical distinction between the authorial and actual audiences and acknowledge individual instances of disparity between them, but in this discussion their difference is ultimately subordinate to what they share: a grounding in the actual world. Furthermore, this combination is all but justified in places by Rabinowitz's own language. For example, he admits that "as good readers," which we hope we are, "we usually try to *become* the authorial audience" (127). Phelan reiterates this notion: "The flesh-and-blood (or actual) reader seeks to enter the authorial audience; hence, when I speak about what 'we' readers do in response to a narrative text, I am referring to the activities of the authorial audience" (*EF* 4). What's implicit here is first that the good reader *wants* to join the authorial audience, and

though there is likely a subset that doesn't, I do not have the space to consider them. Second, and more importantly, any real progress in the "becoming" or "entering" of the authorial audience entails a real, tangible change in the actual reader; the acquisition of necessary information, for instance, results in retained actual-world knowledge, just as the pretense of a required belief materializes as a temporary feature of the reader's actual mind. Thus the authorial audience exists only hypothetically *until* the actual audience succeeds in becoming it, in which case the theoretical line between the two thins to practical nonexistence. Some readers will of course fail to become the authorial audience, whether because of misreading or deliberate textual opacity, and an accumulation of such failures could illuminate something important about a given text. Nevertheless, it remains that *if only* they could've joined the authorial audience the text would've made more sense; and since the goal of analysis is to some degree a *making-sense*, there's an implied claim to *be* the authorial audience beneath every productive analytical effort. I take this as justification enough to center the entity around the mutual grounding in the actual world and the according awareness of (and commitment to) actual-world laws and norms. I'll call this single representative of the actual world the *authorial consciousness*.

A bit more simply, I construct the second half of the binary by dropping the ideal narrative audience altogether. Rabinowitz's move is clever with its perfect parallelism, but I fear it's an over-complication, or else the entity is so abstract it's perpetually out of sight. In any case, all it takes to account for unreliability, irony and the like is to respect the narrative audience a little more. Phelan notes that the observer "within the narrative world" adopts "the normative beliefs and attitudes" of that world ("MTS" 13). Presumably, then, that observer (the narrative audience) is capable of interpreting its observations in terms of the world in which they occur,

thus enjoying enough savvy to separate the truth about the narrative events from the narrator's utterances, where necessary. And all this *without* considering that there might be a vague audience who takes the utterances at face value. In other words, a round, reasoning narrative audience is all we need within the world of the fiction. So, the clear counterpart to the authorial consciousness, I'll call the observer within the narrative world and its awareness of (and commitment to) the laws and norms of that world the *narrative consciousness*. A parallelism of my own.

Switching from "audiences" to "consciousnesses" is an attempt to emphasize the most important aspects of the entities, namely that they're two concurrent parts of *one whole* and that they *interact instantaneously*. Just as Rabinowitz's audiences exist simultaneously, so the authorial and narrative consciousnesses occupy their respective posts at the same time; in Kendall Walton's words, "We do not stop existing when it becomes fictional that we exist" ("Appreciating Fiction" 15). Because the consciousnesses are parts of the same "mind," it follows that while the narrative consciousness observes and evaluates the fictional world, the authorial consciousness automatically pits those observations and evaluations against its understanding of the actual world; the developing beliefs of the narrative consciousness inevitably brush against the established beliefs of the authorial consciousness. This process cycles ceaselessly for the duration of the narrative—in this way the consciousnesses interact, and it happens automatically, at once, no intervention needed. Most importantly, such interaction between two sets of norms and beliefs naturally fosters the prospect of discordance or "disagreement." In some cases the authorial consciousness recognizes difference between its beliefs and the narrative consciousness's; in others, sameness. These recognitions can elicit a

range of responses in the reader, from glee to tension to confusion and so on, which potentially generate a change in the consciousnesses' relation to each other, to the world, and to the narrative itself. And an alteration of the reader's experience (in terms of belief, cognition and the other elements mentioned above) likely results. That process is the foundational concern of this study.

Finally, it's important to note that the authorial consciousness in a sense *subsumes* the narrative consciousness. As readers we are *most actually* in the actual world, which allows us to (requires that we) *extend* into the narrative or extend our consciousness to account for the fictional world. But that extension necessarily exists *within* our real experience of the book in the actual world. In other words, we can close a novel and leave the narrative consciousness behind, but we cannot open it and divorce the actual, to which the authorial corresponds. Whatever the local experience of our narrative consciousness within the fictional world, it must eventually return to the evaluative and interpretive actions of our actual-world selves; the authorial consciousness remains aware of this condition, posing a sort of continual *so what?* that attempts to understand the narrative as an actual-world communicative act. So in the end any work that a narrative performs—change that it catalyzes—will manifest in the actual world. If, as Walton says, “We don’t stop existing when it becomes fictional that we exist,” we do, by contrast, stop fictionally existing when we vacate the fictional world. And that’s in part what lends narrative its power and potency: in the end it circles back to an effort to affect us and our world.

What I’ve been referring to as “narrative worlds” and “fictional worlds” I’ll hereafter call *storyworlds*. My definition of storyworld is, as for many theorists, significantly more straightforward than my model of the reader. It follows from David Herman’s simple assertion: “Storyworlds can be defined as the worlds evoked by narratives” (105). In my slightly more

precise terms, the storyworld is the physical and ontological landscape in which the narrative's events occur, its figures live, and its reader temporarily (and partially) "relocates." It is perhaps useful to *think* of a storyworld as a story*universe*, a tweak that suggests the one important distinction I must make between my definition and those proposed by other critics. For instance, Brian McHale, among others, has discussed extensively the complex ontological structures of many postmodernist texts, narratives that contain multiple worlds, "paraworlds," et cetera.¹ But by my judgment these multiple realms (I'll call them) all belong to the same storyworld. That is to say, if a story is coherent and whole, it cannot have more than one storyworld. Thus the storyworld of Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* contains *both* real London and the haunted Underground peopled by monsters and angels. The split Homeric world is part divine and part profane, and different laws govern each realm, but the *storyworld* of the *Iliad* is simply *a world in which multiple realms exist*. So in a given reading experience there exist only two worlds, the storyworld and the actual world against which the storyworld is set. This distinction will be important for my analysis of Rushdie's novels in chapter two, as will the question of whether multiple independent narratives can share a storyworld. Without dipping more than a tentative toe into the vast debate about the ontological status *of* fiction—governed by figures such as John Searle—I answer affirmatively to that question on the assumption that sufficient and salient similarity across storyworlds' features and inhabitants can render worlds, for all interpretive purposes, identical. Finally, and most importantly for this essay, the storyworld is the world that the narrative consciousness inhabits, observes and evaluates and in turn allows the authorial consciousness to recognize difference or sameness from or to the actual world.

¹ The multiple worlds idea surfaces throughout the entirety of *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) but is especially concentrated in chapters three, four, and five.

No matter their sameness to the actual world, storyworlds of fiction must be products of an imagination, and that imagination, of course, belongs to the *author*. Jan Alber calls the author “omnipotent inventor and creator of the fictional world,” and from a sort of ontological standpoint his definition is all but indisputable (*UN* 92). In critical practice, however, it’s knottier to determine the author’s exact relevance to a text and to our interpretations thereof. Phelan’s glossary entry for “authorial intention” in *Narrative as Rhetoric* concludes, “It is much easier to define the term than to identify all the different stances critics and theorists have taken regarding the concept” (215). He is quite correct. But suffice it to say that I, like Booth, unlike Barthes, do not think it theoretically useful or philosophically accurate to kill or ignore the author in either the experience or the interpretation of literature. Rhetorical theory understands narrative as an interaction, a three-part push-pull between author, text and reader—Phelan calls this relationship “recursive,” meaning that it’s endlessly reciprocal: author creates text that affects reader who applies return pressure to text, altering the perception of author, and so forth in all directions. The obvious consequence of such a view is that all three of these elements are indispensable. For Booth the author is everywhere; in the first chapter of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, for example, under the header “The Author’s Many Voices,” he delineates a plethora of textual phenomena, such as reader address and character reliability, that *cannot exist* without the presence of an author, in some more or less overt form (16). I agree on the author’s necessity up to here, but I follow Phelan in his distancing from Booth’s *insistence* on recovering the author’s *actual* intentions to determine the meaning of a text (*Narrative as Rhetoric* 19). I posit instead a ghostlier entity whose existence is imperative but whose specific characteristics may vary as interpreters deem appropriate.

Most fundamentally, the author is the presence that allows readers to believe that every element of a narrative meaningfully contributes to a conscious attempt at communication. In other words, we need the author in order to assume *design* or *intention*, which justifies our interpretive efforts. Booth writes in *Critical Understanding*, “When texts are torn free of intentions . . . they become uninterpretable.” This assertion follows from his discussion of *understanding*, which he says “no person can have except in conjunction with at least one other person, living or dead” (263-265). If we assume that the literary-critical endeavor is an attempt at understanding, then texts become “uninterpretable” when “torn free of intentions” because they’ve lost the “other person” who guides them to intelligibility. Keeping the “other person” in the arrangement means that when interpreting a text, each attained understanding is implicitly part of the reconstruction of an author who would (and does) intend that understanding. But because we can never reach an objective version of author and design, our reconstructions are always hypothetical; my hypotheses are as honest and accurate as I’m capable of formulating, but they are no inherently greater than others’, insofar as they’re equally sustained by and loyal to the text. What may *not* vary, however, is the *possibility* of a reconstruction, the very fact *that there is*, on the other side of the text, that “someone other than ourselves” to whom Phelan is always referring. That presence is the foundation of my understanding of the author. My argument in this paper relies on the assumption that storyworlds signal something about narrative events. Safely I assume that, solely because I maintain awareness of an author who calculates his composition. Otherwise there’s nothing we cannot attribute to coincidence, nothing at which we cannot lazily throw up our hands and conclude: it means nothing. The author in this sense keeps us honest and reassures us that there’s something to uncover if we dig deep enough. And when

we *do* uncover it, we consider each of our findings a step closer to proper understanding of the text as designed.

In sum, then, in every fictional narrative situation there is an author who designs the narrative, a storyworld that houses the narrative for some significant purpose, and a reader who visits that storyworld with the goal of understanding it. The reader is divided into two consciousnesses: the narrative consciousness inhabits the storyworld, observes and evaluates it, while the authorial consciousness considers these observations and evaluations in terms of the actual world. Recognition therein of accordance or discordance between the two systems—storyworld and actual world—generates a variety of responses in the reader, which potentially alter the consciousnesses' approach to each other, to the worlds, and to the narrative. This interaction occurs instantaneously for the duration of the reader's visit, and it's the basis for the examination of experiential changes across storyworlds that I'll be performing in the following chapters. And once more, rhetorically we understand these changes as reactions happening in accordance with the text's design, thus circling us back to storyworlds constructed by an author for some purpose. With this apparatus assembled we can move into exploring particular manifestations the phenomena.

II. The Poles: Primary and Secondary Worlds

The ambition of literary realism is to plagiarize God's creation.

—Charles Simic, *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth*

So when I found myself in a new world, I determined to start anew.

What had been right and necessary on Earth did not have to be so here.

—Philip José Farmer, "Riverworld"

I confess I've appropriated the terms *primary world* and *secondary world* from J.R.R. Tolkien's classic essay "On Faerie-Stories," but my usage of the terms differs significantly from his.

Tolkien's study outlines a single contrast: the Secondary World, the created world, is set against the Primary World, or the world in which the reader lives. In my terms, the equivalent contrast is between *storyworld* and *actual world* (which I take from Marie-Laure Ryan), and the terms "primary" and "secondary" designate storyworld *types* that are defined by their similarity to or difference from the actual world. In other words, the relation of a storyworld to the actual world determines whether the storyworld is a primary world, a secondary world, a hybrid world (to which I'll turn in chapter three), or something in-between. Nevertheless, many of Tolkien's remarks in "On Faerie Stories" do directly transfer to my thinking about storyworlds. He writes, for instance, about the consuming "enchantment" that readers feel as "wandering explorers" of well-made fictional worlds: the author "makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is true: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside" (60). This understanding of world-visiting is foundational to my inquiry into the reader's experience of literary storyworlds, and the insider "belief" he refers to is, in effect, the viewpoint of what I've called the narrative consciousness. But Tolkien and I again begin to differ as he goes on: "The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed." Of course aesthetic failure sometimes does generate disbelief, but the

“disbelief” to which Tolkien refers seems just as likely to be *ontological complication*, that is, confusion regarding how the laws of the storyworld relate to those of the actual world. Perhaps we briefly “disbelieve” in a narrative event because it violates the parameters we had applied to the storyworld, but our ideal response is not to immediately close the book in aesthetic displeasure but to adjust those parameters to accommodate the apparently violating event. Alternatively, an author might construct a world so quotidian, so unchallenging to our “belief” that it almost perfectly resembles life in the actual world; as a result we might simply map our understanding of the actual world onto the storyworld. These responses (and others like them) constitute interactions and potentially alterations in the relationship between the narrative and authorial consciousnesses, which in turn affect the reader’s overall experience of the narrative.

The emphases of this chapter are the primary world and the secondary world—the *poles*, I’ll call them, of the storyworld continuum. On one end, a primary world is a storyworld that matches the actual world in all fundamental ways (laws of physics, et cetera) and most other ways as well, excepting fictive manifestations of actual-world phenomena, such as invented characters and their actions. At the other end, a secondary world is a storyworld that contains a salient enough presence of the extraordinary to mark the storyworld as fundamentally different from the actual world. The analyses in this chapter progress in that order, primary to secondary, by turn. I begin by defining *realism* in terms of the relationship between storyworld and actual world then likening that realism to primary worlds, surveying the ways in which Zadie Smith aligns the storyworld of *White Teeth* with the actual world and thereby builds a primary world. From there I argue that the primary world produces beliefs in the narrative consciousness that match those of the authorial consciousness, which encourages the reader to interpret the narrative

in terms of the actual world. In Smith's case, that tendency encouraged by the primary world primes the reader to receive the author's candid commentary on the actual world, especially when that commentary takes the form of a forthright authorial intrusion, or a voice in the narration that directly instructs us to consider something about our world. Smith builds a primary world, in other words, to disburse the content of her argument to the reader with more immediacy and specificity than would be plausible with a storyworld less obviously like the actual world.

By contrast, in a secondary world, significant and salient difference from the actual world signals to the authorial consciousness that actual-world parameters are not sufficient for understanding the storyworld; as a result, the beliefs of the observing narrative consciousness take lead through the storyworld, allowing the reader to follow, enjoy, and interpret the narrative's extraordinary or impossible phenomena free of the authorial consciousness's commitment to resolving such phenomena in terms of the actual world. In place of these individual, micro resolutions, the authorial consciousness becomes interested in the *so what* of the construction more broadly. The secondary world orients this macro interpretive action away from particulars toward the general, even universal concepts shared by the actual world and the storyworld. In the case of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Rushdie builds a secondary world to argue for the universal necessity of freedom of expression and against the danger that is tyrannical ideology.

a. The Primary World of Zadie Smith's White Teeth

The term "realism" is troublesome in literary study because it denotes different things to different people in different contexts. To some it's a stylistic maneuver, namely the

descriptiveness of, say, Balzac or early James, which over the course of several pages yields quite the complete portrait of the chaise lounge in the corner of the drawing room. To others realism is an attention to “real life”—Tolstoy representing actual battles—or to “real,” often lowly people: Dickens’s poor, Dostoyevsky’s mad. To still others, particularly in pedagogical settings, capital-R Realism is a temporal marker used to refer to the period between roughly 1850 and 1900, brackets inside which all the writers mentioned in this paragraph can fit. And of course I still haven’t emptied the definition-hoard. But rather than do so and need afterward to sort through the pile, claiming what gets to be “realist” and what doesn’t, I want to propose here a broader and simpler definition of the term that includes within it the understandings I’ve delineated above and others that might differ in means but work toward the same end.

By my account, *realism is a measure of the perceived similarity between the storyworld of a text and the actual world.*² The more *clearly* and *certainly* the two worlds accord, the more realist the narrative; thus, the writer who aspires to realism strives for clear and certain likeness of her fictional world to the actual world of her audience. This clarity and certainty can be achieved in myriad ways, which allows, for example, the text-message bubbles embedded in Jonathan Franzen’s novel *Purity* to be as realist as the straightforward he-said-she-said dialogue of nineteenth-century fiction, despite the formal difference in technique. Indeed, for Franzen translating a text-message exchange into straightforward prose would be *less* realist than providing the exchange as it appears on the screen, just as dividing a conversation into blue and white bubbles would be unthinkable un-realist for Hardy or Thackeray. My point here is that the

² As such, I am not positing realism as a genre per se but a classification determined by the relation of qualities of a fictional world to those of the actual world. Thus, realism can vary independent of genre or mode, with some discrete genres—detective fiction, travel writing—(hypothetically) being equally realist even as others—gothic fiction, classical epic—are, by virtue of the storyworlds inherent in their generic status, significantly less so.

actual world with which the realist storyworld accords is the world of the *authorial consciousness*, or the version of the actual world to which the author understands her audience to be in-tune. Rabinowitz proposes a hypothetical “theory of literary realism” based on the “distance” between the authorial and narrative audiences, and this idea is similar to the one that I’m outlining here. However, I don’t quite agree with “distance” because it implies a sort of *travel* and a duration thereof, which would undermine the instantaneity with which the narrative and authorial consciousnesses interact; as Thomas Pavel puts it, “To read a text or to look at a painting means already to inhabit their worlds,” therefore any terminology that suggests a time-lapse is misleading. Hence, Rabinowitz’s realism would be better phrased as a theory of the *difference* between the narrative and authorial audiences, or, in my terms, between the beliefs of the narrative and authorial consciousnesses. Yet this is still a little erroneous, for the relation of the narrative consciousness to the authorial consciousness doesn’t *determine* the realism of a text but *results from* it. That is, the similarity of the storyworld to the actual world comes first, and the consciousnesses, observing their respective worlds, respond accordingly.

The pinnacle of this realism, then, is the narrative whose posited storyworld literally *is* the actual world of the authorial consciousness, as (purportedly) in nonfiction, in which case the distinction between the consciousnesses disappears entirely. It is important to consider narratological principles in relation to nonfiction, but for now I’m concerned with storyworlds whose differences from the actual world are minimal, innocuous; these storyworlds I call *primary worlds*. Because realism is a measure of the storyworld’s accordance with the actual world, the degree to which a text is realist is likewise the degree to which its storyworld is *primary*. And just as a text’s realism is contingent upon the clarity and certainty of its world’s

accordance with the actual world, so does the world's *primary*-ness (so to speak) depend upon that same clarity and certainty. In what follows I examine an extreme version of a primary-world narrative, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, surveying various ways in which Smith clearly and certainly tethers her storyworld to the actual world and thereby builds a primary world. I do not, however, claim comprehensiveness; the strategies I examine are meant to lend an understanding of the construction of *White Teeth*'s world as primary, but neither that list of strategies nor the experiential effects I discuss are exhaustive.

i. Realism by Reference

Smith's most explicit appeal to the actual world in *White Teeth* is what Phelan calls "local referentiality," or the "presence of historical figures and events in fiction" (EF 217). In McHale's words, "literary reference" is a system "whereby an internal (fictional) field of reference and an external (real-world) field overlap and interpenetrate." As "overlap and interpenetrate" suggest, referentiality creates a kind of *tangible* likeness between storyworld and actual world and thus enhances the realism of the text, "on the condition," McHale points out, "that the properties attributed to [the referents] in the text do not actually contradict the 'official' [actual-world] record" (PF 86-7). I will extend Phelan's "historical figures and events" to include places, objects, ideas, and so forth then impose, *for this study*, an additional criterion: the references discussed here will have or be derived from something with the status of a proper noun. It's not the case that *only* proper nouns can be referential, but they often function as uniquely clear markers of reference, so I'll make them my focus here. This choice also protects against the appropriation of everything that doesn't contradict the actual world as contributions to realism, which would be redundant to the point of critical uselessness.

It would take a scholarly book twice as long as *White Teeth* to annotate all of its effective references to the actual world, so I cannot attempt to provide a full list of them here. For an impression of their pervasiveness, however, here are the local references from the first page of each of the novel's twenty chapters: [1] Cricklewood Broadway (London), Cavalier Musketeer Estate (automobile); [2] "Hitler's Napoleonic ambition"; [3] Corinthians, Morocco, Belgium, Italy, Willesden Green (London); [4] Euston Road (London); [5] "English manners," "Russian ground"; [6] "Chinese burn"; [7] Bombay, Kingston, Delhi, and the British television constantly airing in these cities; [8] "a map of the Arab Emirates," English painter George Stubbs, Antiguan cricketer Viv Richards; [9] *Woman's Own* magazine; [10] New Year's Eve, Germany; [11] adjectives European and Jamaican regarding anatomical proportions; [12] "The March of History" (Marx's phrase), "lapsed-Catholic"; [13] adjective English, the Earl of Ellenborough; [14] Saint Paul, Delhi, Keats, adjective Bengali, Clarissa (of Richardson's novel); [15] Cinderella; [16] Heathrow Airport (London); [17] television programs *Antique's Roadshow* and *The Equalizer*, English actor Edward Woodward, adjective Cockney; [18] Islam, adjective Caribbean; [19] "Union Jacks," England, New Year's Eve, adjective Somalian, Willesden and Trafalgar Square (London); finally [20] almost nothing, except that the chapter title, "Of Mice and Memory," alludes to Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men* and Robert Burns's poem "To a Mouse" ("The best laid schemes of mice and men / Go often askew"). Marie-Laure Ryan notes that "the use of place names borrowed from real-world geography situates the story in a specific spatial setting" (NS/SN 19). Smith displays, with the places mentioned above and many others, a topographical mastery of London, past and present, and thereby firmly roots (most of) *White Teeth* in the capital city of England. I would furthermore argue a rough equivalence of Ryan's

claim about places to the effect of “names borrowed from real-world [anything else].” In other words, just as “Trafalgar Square” situates the action in London, somewhere between the National Gallery and Elizabeth Tower, so does “Hitler’s Napoleonic vision” situate the surrounding discourse within our understanding of foolhardy ambition in the actual world. In this way each instance of local referentiality reaches out and wraps around the actual world in whatever context the reference appears.³ And by wrapping around the actual world, each instance of local referentiality therefore appeals to the authorial consciousness, verifies the applicability of its beliefs to whatever aspect of the storyworld a given reference pertains. This understanding will be the basis of the analyses to come. I’ll stress once more that the references I’ve included above are from *only the first page of each chapter*. If we consider the length of *White Teeth*—448 pages—in light of the twenty pages worth of references I’ve listed here, the enormous importance of actual-world elements to the construction of the storyworld becomes obvious.

But more potent than the mere appearance of these references in the book are the characters’ interactions with them; as the characters interact with actual-world elements, they solidify the existence of those elements in the storyworld and simultaneously place themselves within actual-world physical or psychological spheres. For example, a little over midway through the novel, Irie agrees to be a part of Marcus Chalfen’s FutureMouse project, a genetic-engineering study that Chalfen proposes will “eliminate randomness” and thence enable scientists to eradicate disease and other undesirable traits and conditions. Clara, Irie’s mother, is displeased with Irie’s involvement, but she’s too busy to “consolidate” her displeasure with Alsana, whose son Millat is also, at this moment, a friend of the Chalfens. The source of that

³ Unless, of course, the reference in the narrative contradicts the accepted truth about its supposed referent in the actual world.

busyness: “night school three days a week (courses: British Imperialism 1765 to the Present; Medieval Welsh Literature; Black Feminism)” (284). By specifying these courses, which could well be in session right now at any English or American university, Smith not only explains what consumes Clara’s time but also immerses Clara in entire actual-world bodies of thought. As a result, the overlap between actual world and storyworld extends to the intellectual level: the characters muse over the same topics that we do.

That intellectual referentiality expands to cover spiritual and political territory as well. The focal characters in the novel are divided on religious grounds. Hortense and Ryan Topps, for instance, are Jehovah’s Witnesses, while Samad and Millat are Muslim, and their respective affiliations often surface blatantly in the discourse. Nearly every sentence Hortense speaks is scriptural. She quotes Genesis 11:9 on page 318 and nine pages later “interprets” Revelation 3:15, pivoting through the bookends of the Bible as if to posit her Christian commitment as total, all-encompassing. Similarly, near the end of the novel Millat and his group KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation) discuss translations of the Qu’rān. Brother Hifan exclaims,

“But Dawood is a plod! . . . I refer you to 52:44: *If they saw a part of heaven falling down, they would still say: ‘It is but a mass of clouds!’* Mass of clouds? It is not a rock concert. At least with Rodwell there is some attempt to capture the poetry, the remarkable nature of the Arabic . . .” (415)

These remarks densify the religious referentiality by engaging the characters in debates that occur within actual-world religious communities. Such is the case too with the veiled but powerful allusion to Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* and the fatwa affair that followed. In chapter nine Millat’s crew, still relatively newly-formed, boards a train at King’s Cross for which

they have not purchased tickets. The train is bound for Bradford, where the boys plan to partake in a protest of, it becomes clear, Rushdie's book.

"Is he actually gonna be there?"

All serious questions were always addressed to Millat, and Millat always answered the group as a whole. "No way. He ain't going to be there. Just brothers going to be there. It's a fucking protest, you chief, why's he going to go to a protest against himself?"

"I'm just saying," said Ranil, wounded, "I'd fuck him up, yeah? If he was there, you know. Dirty fucking book." (193)⁴

The Satanic Verses was published in the United Kingdom in 1988 and immediately became controversial for content Muslims deemed blasphemous against the prophet. On Valentine's Day 1989, Iranian Islamic leader Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa that called for Rushdie's murder. Exactly a month previous, 14 January 1989, Muslim protestors had staged a book-burning in Bradford, England⁵; in a very deliberate and *inviting* stylistic move, Smith heads the section from which I've excerpted "*January 14, 1989*," so that this scene of Millat's crew cursing that "dirty book" is even more strongly referential than it initially seems. The date of the protest in the storyworld perfectly matches the date of the historical event—the fictional characters are participating in the behavior of many actual-world people. And that behavior is, of course, driven by religious and political ideology that exists in the actual world. The referentiality of the scene thus aligns the actions and motivations of the characters with the actions and motivations of the corresponding actual-world communities.

As it turns out, none of the crew members has read *The Satanic Verses*. "I haven't exactly read it exactly," Millat admits, but "you don't have to read shit to know that it's blasphemous" (194). That of course isn't true, but Smith here is implicitly aligning Millat and his

⁴ On this page, I *must* point out, the narrator refers to Nike Sportswear, W.B. Yeats, and the Summer of Love in three successive sentences. Local referentiality at its eclectic extreme.

⁵ See Rahim (2012), *The Guardian's* "Looking Back" (2014), and BBC's *The Satanic Verses Affair* (2009)

friends with the actual-world communities who condemned Rushdie without reading his book. Other characters do actively participate in the aesthetic experiences of the actual world. Early on, for example, Archie sings “a ten-year old Dylan track”: “*But I was so much older then . . . I’m younger than that now*” (17). The track is “My Back Pages,” from Dylan’s 1964 album *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, the relative obscurity of which—it isn’t exactly “Like a Rolling Stone”—drills depth into the cultural overlap of the worlds. Moreover, that Archie is evidently a fan of Dylan inducts him into another actual-world community, Dylan’s sizable following, which in turn implies (if more weakly) the historical phenomena partially responsible for that fandom: Dylan’s unpredictable live shows, his smart-aleck manner in interviews. In this way a single, short character-engagement with local referentiality signals the existence of an entire strand of our cultural history within the storyworld. Equally potent from a world-building perspective is Millat’s reliance on film for his personal identity, which frequently leads Smith to near-epic similes involving figures from showbiz.

All women, of every shade, from midnight-black to albino, were Millat’s . . .
Now, don’t be jealous. There’s no point. There have always been and always
will be people who simply exude sex (who breath it, who *sweat* it). A few
examples from thin air: the young Brando, Madonna, Cleopatra, Pam Grier
. . . And Millat had it. (306)

We’re made to understand Millat’s sexual appeal by way of a comparison with the actual-world people who portray characters like the ones by whom Millat is captivated. This move is taken an ontological half-step down shortly thereafter.

He minded about Karina Cain, because she was his *love*, and his love
should be his love and nobody else’s. Protected like Liotta’s wife in
GoodFellas or Pacino’s sister in *Scarface*. Treated like a princess. (310)

Here Millat has just “dumped [Karina] unceremoniously,” and the heavily focalized narration grants us access to the references Millat uses to make sense of his feelings. The proper nouns

themselves, Liotta and Pacino, are still of the actual world, but the characters referenced (“Liotta’s *wife*”) are from the storyworlds of *GoodFellas* and *Scarface*. This referentiality entails not only the existence of the films in the storyworld but also a kind of affective engagement with the films’ characters on the part of Millat that mirrors *our* engagement with him and his acquaintances in *White Teeth*. In other words, Millat, *like us*, identifies with and is influenced by powerful fictional characters, and these particular characters belong to actual-world films that are equally available for our engagement.

As Millat’s outrage at Rushdie and the association of his relationship with films indicate, Smith also employs local referentiality to illustrate the emotional lives of her characters. The most straightforward version of this strategy is the inclusion of actual-world catastrophe in the storyworld, which has additional implications for the biographies of the characters. Hortense, matriarch of the novel, is given a short biographical chapter titled “The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden” that contextualizes her somewhat abusive conception and narrates the occasion of her birth. “Any root canal of Hortense,” Smith writes, “must go right to the very beginning,” by which she means “The events of January 14, 1907, the day of the terrible Jamaican earthquake”—and the day of Hortense’s birth. Ambrosia, Hortense’s mother and a Kingston native, endures on 14 January 1907 a parallel between the natural disaster outside and the physical experience of childbirth.

And then the world began to shake. Inside Ambrosia, waters broke. Outside Ambrosia, the floor cracked . . . Any other afternoon in Jamaica, the screams of Ambrosia, the screams that followed each contraction of her womb as Hortense pushed out, would have caught somebody’s attention, brought somebody to her aid. But the world was ending that afternoon in Kingston. Everybody was screaming. (299)

In this passage Hortense’s first moments are tightly intertwined with the earthquake: the onset of her birth occurs concurrently with initial shake of the quake; the floor cracks from shock as

Ambrosia opens to allow Hortense's entrance into the world. Most explicit of all, Ambrosia's contraction screams blend into the screams of those terrified by the earthquake, audibly synthesizing the fictional birth with the historical disaster, effectively positing storyworld and actual world as one even as the authorial consciousness remains aware of the characters' fictionality. The referentiality covers emotional ground in that the death and destruction caused by the earthquake doubtless created a general air of devastation in Kingston, the city in which Hortense was to be raised and conditioned. Furthermore, Hortense is by far the oldest main character in *White Teeth*, and as such we might say she's the foundation of the rest of the main characters; Clara issues forth from her and marries Archie, bears Irie, and together they move through the storyworld. Thus, this very real historical event and its consequences are embedded into the personal history of many of the novel's characters, and importantly, vitally so, as revealed by such remarks as "Clara Bowden . . . could only state definitively that her own mother was born . . . in the middle of the Kingston earthquake. *The rest was rumor, folktale, and myth*" (280, my emphasis). The sole genealogical certainty that fictional Clara possesses is inseparable from an actual-world historical catastrophe.

It is actually inaccurate to call Hortense the foundation of the main characters, for she is the foundation of only the Bowdens and is therefore responsible for only half of the main population of *White Teeth*. The other half we can trace up through Samad to Mangal Pande. Great-grandfather Pande's referential status is *double* that of Hortense's, for he has not only a tie to a historical event, the Indian Mutiny of 1857, but also the status of a historical figure within that event. Indeed, Pande is sometimes credited with *catalyzing* the Indian Mutiny,⁶ and for that

⁶ See D'Souza, "Mangal Pandey: Indian Soldier"

reason Samad sees Pande as a hero, defending him against charges of treason, irrelevance, and all the rest *besides* heroism. We can probably credit Samad's worship of Pande for some of Samad's rather erratic and frustrated behavior during and immediately following World War II; these war scenes, which comprise chapter five, constitute a large-scale referentiality that I will discuss again below. For now I will simply reemphasize that Pande's referentiality functions for the Iqbals as Hortense's birth amidst the earthquake does for the Bowdens: he tethers their familial history and, in this case, Samad's self-identification to the actual world.

The result of *White Teeth*'s local referentiality as I've surveyed it is a storyworld that is topographically, intellectually, spiritually, politically, artistically, emotionally, and (more broadly) historically akin to the actual world. References to actual-world places, people, events, ideas, and artistic artifacts clearly suggest a connection to the world of the authorial consciousness, and as the fictional characters interact with those referents in ways that resemble actual-world interactions, the existence of the referents within the storyworld becomes objective, empirical, and the characters' lives reflect our own. Clearly and certainly, the worlds accord. We have thus literary realism par excellence; we have thus a defining exemplar of the *primary world*.

The experiential consequence of the primary world is a sort of *bolstering* of the beliefs of the authorial consciousness. If the storyworld matches the actual world in every important conceivable way—topography to religion to emotion and so forth—then the observer of the storyworld, the narrative consciousness, will operate under a system of beliefs that matches those belonging to the authorial consciousness, the observer of the actual world. In turn, the authorial consciousness, ultimately the interpreter of the narrative as designed by an author, will apply its understanding of the actual world to the storyworld. The consciousnesses respond this way on a

small scale to each of the storyworld's appeals to the actual world, and when these appeals compound to form such a primary world such as *White Teeth*'s, the reader interprets and generally experiences the narrative as a story that is to be understood as occurring in the actual world, with the sole distinction that it did not historically transpire.

ii. Realism and Narrative Progression

White Teeth sprawls more than it flows. Upon its release Michiko Kakutani called it, in *The New York Times*, “a big, splashy, populous production reminiscent of books by Dickens.” Five days later, in the *Times Book Review*, Anthony Quinn described it as portraying “a restless hybrid of voices, tones and textures” and “hopscoching through several continents and 150 years of history.” Whatever our phrasing, it's breadth—of time, of space, of personality—that characterizes *White Teeth* more than anything else, and, moreover, it's breadth that makes *White Teeth* so richly *world-oriented*. Nevertheless, Smith has a story to tell, a narrative that is to progress *through* the primary world of the novel, and my objective at present is to examine the interaction of this story's movement with the primary world in which it moves. That is to ask, how does Smith achieve realism at salient points in the narrative progression? How does the realism in those moments influence our experience of the narrative progression? And how does the narrative progression affect (enhance or diminish) the primary-ness of the storyworld? I will admit outright that I cannot do justice to the “whole” of *White Teeth*'s narrative progression in this essay because, as suggested by the review excerpts above, little stories, *petits récits*, abound almost endlessly across centuries of storyworld time. My focus, rather, will be only a few moments of particular importance on the macro scale.

Let us begin, then, at the beginning. In Phelan's terms, narrative beginnings are defined by four aspects, the first of which is *exposition*, or "everything, including the front matter, that provides information about the narrative" and its characters, setting, and events. Exposition is not limited to beginnings; it can occur anywhere in a narrative; but beginning exposition is especially consequential because it constitutes the *initial* influence on "our understanding of the narrative world" (EF 17). The beginning is, in other words, our all-important first impression of the storyworld. As such, the expository first paragraph of *White Teeth* is a proper introduction into a primary world.

Early in the morning, late in the century, Cricklewood Broadway. At 0627 hours On January 1, 1975, Alfred Archibald Jones was dressed in corduroy and sat in a fume-filled Cavalier Musketeer Estate facedown on a steering wheel, hoping the judgment would not be too heavy upon him. He lay in a prostrate cross, jaw slack, arms splayed on either side like some fallen angel; scrunched up in each fist he held his army service medals (left) and his marriage license (right) . . . (3)

This is the realism of mechanics, the inventoried information, the successive descriptors upfront and at length; it's a case of the stylistic maneuver I mentioned (with reference to Balzac and James) above. Smith gives us place, time, protagonist, his thoughts, outfit, posture, and car model, all in the first three sentences of the novel. Some of it is so precise it almost winks in irony: military notation? *Alfred* Archibald Jones? The parentheticals "(right)" and "(left)" are unnecessary except to relieve the reader of imaginative inference. What results is *clarity* and *certainty* of scene, and when local referentiality—Cricklewood, Cavalier—overtly overlaps that scene with the actual world, our first impression is that *White Teeth*'s storyworld is definitively primary. And, as happens, we carry that first impression with us and let it color our experience of subsequent episodes.

Smith also employs throughout a kind of discursive, form-content realism that coordinates what occurs in the storyworld with how the reader experiences the discourse in the

actual world. This strategy is most outrightly prevalent in the dialect in which Clara and Hortense speak: “Marnin’ de the world new, every time. Man . . . dis life no easy!” (21). We find dialect renderings in many nineteenth-century novels such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Huckleberry Finn*, and, as the former’s tenebrous storyworld suggests, it is not a technique exclusive to realist narrative. But it works toward realism in *White Teeth* by diminishing the inferential brainwork necessary for accurate apprehension of the primary storyworld. Various other versions of form-content realism have this effect in the novel. For instance, on two occasions Smith *transcribes* rather than *describes* figures hand-drawn by the characters. The first figure is a set of skeletal illustrations that Irie draws while lamenting her physique, and the second is “IQBAL” scratched into the cement beneath a bench in Trafalgar Square; in these cases the narration is focalized through Irie and Millat, respectively, and the transcriptions appear as the characters themselves are looking at them (223, 418). Therefore what we apprehend is the *thing itself*, a direct experience of the storyworld that corresponds to the experience of the characters. Such an increase in immediacy equalizes the storyworld and the actual world and in turn enhances the realism of the moment.

If that moment is uniquely gripping or salient, it follows that an enhancement of its realism would be especially consequential for the realism of the storyworld more generally. The latter illustration above, the “IQBAL” beneath the bench, appears near the nearest thing to a global “climax” we might find in *White Teeth*. Chapter eighteen ends with the “birth” of FutureMouse. The narration, focalized through Magid, runs through FutureMouse’s completion in comparison to a human birth then concludes, “Just certainty in its purest form. And what more, thought Magid . . . What more is God than *that*?” (405). In other words, through this

project, Marcus has accomplished with science the power and status of the Almighty. Chapter nineteen offers a panoramic of the main characters as they travel downtown to Marcus's culminating presentation of the mouse. We begin with Marcus's son Joshua and move seamlessly to Millat then to Ryan, all of whom oppose FutureMouse and plan to disturb Chalfen's presentation of it—Joshua objects on animal-rights ground, and Millat and Ryan on religious ground. Millat is cognitively impaired, freshly high on marijuana; "Will you do it?" he asks Shiva, referring to the disturbance, to which Shiva replies, "Taking into account your . . . umm . . . present condition . . . the question is, will *you*?" The Millat-focalized narrator responds:

Now *there* was a question. Millat was half sure that he was possibly maybe going to do something or not that would be correct and very silly and fine and un-good. (416)

What? The second sentence, as I take it, represents the thoughts of a weed-muddled mind, and its claim is incoherent, slurred and self-negating as it is: do something *or not*, fine *and* un-good. Though we do not yet know the nature of the act, the idea swirling through Millat's head is explicitly opposed to KEVIN's "Plan B," which entails (nonviolently) reading aloud from the Qu'rān during the presentation. So we assume that Millat's "Plan A" is violent, dangerous, and our anticipation thereof charges the moment with suspense. Form-content realism in the focalization enables us to apprehend Millat's cognitive blariness with immediacy, which strengthens our perception of his erraticism and thereby intensifies our anxiety in the face of the coming scenes.

Millat chokes back vomit, he and KEVIN board a train, and "twenty minutes later" they arrive within a brief walk of their destination.

. . . the Bakerloo Line delivered them into the icy cold of Trafalgar Square. In the distance, Big Ben. In the square, Nelson. Havelock. Napier. George IV. And then the National Gallery, back there near St. Martin's. All the statues

facing the clock. (417)

And thus *we* arrive, in our suspense, at a sequential view of Trafalgar Square, punctuated at each point by the actual-world landmarks that pepper the plaza. Here the form-content realism of Millat's muddled musing runs immediately into local referentiality; Millat is high, we anticipate his severe action, and at this precise moment we're reminded of the primary world. This point in the narrative progression is important, the end is near so it *feels* momentous, and the juxtaposition of such a consequential fictional moment with a complete view of the actual-world setting suggests the two worlds are necessarily linked. To take "linked" a step further, "All the statues facing the clock" echoes a scene five pages previous in which Joshua, also high, turns "out of Westminster" and watches "Big Ben approach the hour" when he will "topple [his] father's house" (412).⁷ Suspense is here too, the event *to come* clearly indicated, and that suspense is marked tangible by the movement of the actual-world clock that Joshua watches. In other words, *the nonfictional clock traces the approach of the fictional event*. As a result the difference between the storyworld and the actual world is all but imperceptible.

The climactic event unfolds. Millat goes with Plan A, which, it turns out, entails a handgun, entails *killing* the FutureMouse researcher(s); this is ultimately unsurprising, for we learn that Millat's religious motivation is only superficial, and his actual objective is infamy: "If Marcus Chalfen was going to write his name all over the world, Millat was going to write his BIGGER" (419). Heroically, however, and perhaps foolhardily, Archie leaps in front of the firing gun, filling the space "between Millat Iqbal's decision and his target" and thus, we presume, saving Chalfen's life (442). But before we can be sure of the outcome, the narration flashes back

⁷ Smith means Elizabeth Tower. Big Ben is the bell inside the clock tower and so cannot quite be "watched." But the mistake is inconsequential.

to Greece, 1945, to Archie leading captured Frenchman Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret, a scientist who worked on the Nazi “sterilization program,” to his execution. Giving this analepsis its proper evaluative due is outside the scope of this essay; my point here, from a world-building perspective, is that the grandest item of *White Teeth*’s local referentiality, the Second World War that unites Archie and Samad, literally *intercepts* the most pivotal moment in the narrative progression. The storyworld’s World War II is complete with its own references (Hitler, Russian soldiers, Colonel-General Jodl’s peace-signing) that ensure actual-world validity, and we have to revisit that war to make our way through the final, decisive fictional event. Again, the fictional and the actual seem to be inseparable, and that Smith repeatedly underscores this inseparability as the narrative progresses from anticipation to arrival of the story’s most globally climactic event serves only to augment our perception of the storyworld’s likeness to the actual world—which is to say the text’s realism, which is to say its primary world.

Yet the shooting, which I’ve called the narrative’s most pivotal event, is still perhaps eclipsed in consequentiality by the disclosure in the scene that bifurcates it. The flashback to Archie’s episode with Perret fills a major gap in the progression of chapter five, the war chapter. Therein Archie had taken Perret “into the darkness,” a shot had rung out, which we hear focalized through Samad, and Archie had emerged bloody and alone. There the chapter ends, and for three hundred pages we can reasonably presume Perret dead. But then he turns up at the FutureMouse presentation as Chalfen’s “mentor,” the pioneer of the genetic-engineering field and the godfather, as it were, of the Mouse project. Marcus credits Perret accordingly just before the shooting and thus just before the flashback, which then divulges how and why Archie did *not* kill Perret thirty-seven years before. In the flashback Perret pleads for his life, gradually

softening Archie's resolve, so Archie places his gun on the dirt and decides to flip a coin: heads, the doctor dies, tails, he lives. The coin lands tails but irrelevantly, for as Archie turns to retrieve his errant toss Perret fetches the gun from the ground and shoots Archie in the thigh before the verdict is revealed. That shot explains the blood on Archie's leg as he emerges from the darkness at chapter five's end, and Archie's decision to flip the coin, which was *not* the murderous plan, ultimately explains how and why Perret has lived to embolden FutureMouse to completion. Just before Millat draws his gun Marcus remarks, "If any one person deserves the lion's share of recognition for the marvel you see before you, it is Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret" (441). The implication after the flashback, then, is that had Archie chosen to kill Perret as planned, FutureMouse—indeed, maybe the entire field of inquiry—would never have existed. And had FutureMouse never existed, a sizable portion of the narrative events, including these final scenes that bring all the novel's characters together, could never have occurred. Therefore, not only does the flashback intercept the climactic shooting, forcing us to notice the actual world through referentiality, but the decision that Archie makes in that flashback, within the referential frame of World War II, facilitates the events that ensue. In this way, *White Teeth* acts out its own argument.

iii. The Argument

In the pages leading up to Millat's shooting, scenes and discourse begin to recur from earlier moments in the novel. Questions raised during Archie and Samad's time in the war resurface among the younger generation. Joshua runs through "that old, cheesy, end-of-the-world scenario," wondering what he might do if the apocalypse was imminent (convert to Judaism? copulate with the babysitter?); Joely, Josh's FATE partner, discusses choosing "between

betraying [her] country and betraying [her] friend,” the choice “between a duty and a principle” (410-11). Josh’s apocalyptic reflection harkens back to a wartime debate between Archie and Samad, in which Samad chastised Archie for choosing to “achieve orgasm” with his final moments, claiming that he would kneel and pray instead. The debate between kin and country (to whom are we most obligated?) is a famous thought-experiment of Sartre’s and one of the rhetorical devices employed by Perret to dissuade Archie from killing him. Interestingly, this occurrence becomes a recurrence for the reader only retrospectively, *after* the flashback, just as the narration of Archie’s coin flip at O’Connell’s in chapter seventeen becomes a “repeat” of the flashback flip in chapter twenty: “The coin rose and flipped as a coin would rise and flip every time in a perfect world . . . [then] the arc went wrong, and Archibald realized that it was not coming back to him at all but going behind him, a far way behind him” (377, 447, identically). Due to the length of the novel, it even perhaps takes us recognizing Perret’s physical reappearance to realize that the location of the FutureMouse presentation, the “Perret Institute,” is named after a character from chapter five. All of these examples, including the formal placement of the flashback itself, exemplify Smith’s principal argument: *the past inevitably returns, whether by literally recurring or by conditioning the present, even if that fact becomes apparent only in retrospect; thus, it behooves us to remember our past and to act at every moment as if our actions will be felt forever*. Or, as Smith’s first epigraph puts it, “What is past is prologue.” It’s this point that Smith makes through Archie’s saving Chalfen and Perret and sending the engineered mouse on an implied journey into the world (“*Go on my son!*”). We can, as Chalfen proposes, “eliminate the random,” triumph over our helplessness, by acting now as if we alone effect our future.

But what does this have to do with the storyworld? My claim is that the primary world of *White Teeth* reduces the difference between the authorial and narrative consciousnesses to its smallest point short of erasure, which encourages us to interpret⁸ every element of the narrative in terms of the actual world. In the final two chapters Smith begins to articulate the contours of her argument via ventriloquy through the characters. Piqued by the effigies in Trafalgar Square, KEVIN member Abdul-Colin wonders why the English “build their statues with their backs to the culture and their eyes on the time” then concludes that “they look to their future to forget their past.” The narrator digs into Millat’s psyche to reveal his philosophy of life, or more specifically that “he believes the decisions that are made, come back. He believes we live in circles.” Clara criticizes Alsana for her “very convenient way” of “forgetting what happened two minutes ago.” Irie complains about her family and the Iqbals and their “endless maze of present rooms and past rooms and things said in them years ago and everybody’s old historical shit all over the place” (417-26). The primary world siphons these remarks to our authorial consciousness unmediated and thus conveys them directly to our understanding of the actual world. Smith quite clearly has an actual-world contention that she wants and expects every reader to have heeded by book’s end; by uniting the beliefs of the narrative and authorial consciousnesses, the primary world of *White Teeth* ensures that we apply (even if we disagree with and ultimately discard) argument-revealing claims to the world in which we live. Rhetorical theorists, of course, assert this same thing about *every* narrative: authors try to persuade readers to take a certain position. But it’s the *immediacy*, the *frequency*, and the *specificity* with which

⁸ I use “interpret” to refer not only to the deliberate and often arduous act of literary analysis but also to the more automatic, intuitive processes that enable us to understand phenomena.

Smith inserts her contentions into the reader's world that sets apart *White Teeth* and its primary world.

This strategy works particularly well for Smith's design because her argument is resolutely *content-based*, by which I mean that *White Teeth* essentially has a *paraphrasable thesis*. The novel, like all others, of course offers a temporal aesthetic journey too, but that journey is ultimately subordinate to the content of the contention. So as long as readers apprehend her claims, Smith has succeeded. Storyworlds as definitively primary as *White Teeth*'s support the wielding of an additional discursive device that is particularly useful for disbursing claims about the actual world—we might call it a *lyric voice*. Phelan defines lyric as “somebody telling somebody else . . . that something *is*” or “somebody telling somebody else . . . his or her meditations on something.” The characteristic experience of lyric in these terms is a kind of *participation* in the speaker's position: we “recognize that the speaker is different from us,” Phelan writes, but we move “toward adopting the speaker's perspective” (EF 22). This latter claim shares a great deal with Kendall Walton's formulation of (lyric) poetry as “thoughtwriting,” the mental equivalent to speechwriting, whereby the poet constructs a kind of cognitive stance for the reader to *try on* for the duration of the poem. In his recent *Theory of the Lyric* Jonathan Culler endorses Walton's “thoughtwriting” notion and offers an accordant assertion of his own: lyrics “do not in general . . . create a fictional universe” but rather “make real statements about our world” (107, 129). An amalgamation of these three definitions constitutes what I'm calling the lyric voice in *White Teeth*. The narration often shifts into a personality that seems concerned not with the storyworld but with the actual world, and it

beckons us to think in those terms alongside it. A brief survey of the lyric voice in *White Teeth* and its world-building effect will wrap up my discussion of primary worlds.

Smith builds and buttresses a lyric voice in multiple ways, each contributing with different degrees of explicitness to a narrating *personality* willing and ready to tell “that something is” in the actual world. To begin at the atomic level, the narrator occasionally uses profanity outside of dialogue—for instance, “There is no fucking end to it, just as there is no fucking beginning to it” (383). If we understand profanity as emotional or crude or powerful or even indicative of a speaker’s having “nothing better to say,” its presence in the narration implies a kind of mimetic subjectivity that we would not expect in this seemingly omniscient third-person extradiegetic narrator. In many cases we can attribute profanity to focalization, which would diminish this effect, but that rationale does not work for some other lyric techniques. There are a number of pronoun usages that implicate the actual world, many *you*’s and *we*’s, and they increase in power and complexity when they involve not only the reader but a character as well. “You could be without family in O’Connell’s,” chapter ten opens, “and be exactly the same as everybody else in there.” This statement is about what *is* in the storyworld, but the second-person pronoun reaches out to us, includes us in the collective *you* comprised of the fictional characters for whom O’Connell’s really is the place described here. Similarly, as we learn of Millat’s belief that “we live in circles,” the narrator evaluates Millat’s position: “Amid the strange landscapes that have replaced our belief in the efficacy of the stars, Millat’s is not such an odd terrain” (419). This sentence is a striking ontological maneuver—the succession of the words “amid,” “our,” and “Millat’s” joins the reader’s “strange landscapes” to the narrator’s then inserts Millat’s belief into the same domain, thereby equalizing the worlds of the reader, the

narrator, and the characters. Replicating that equalization are allusions and similes that invoke actual-world subjects. In addition to comparing Millat to film actors, as I've discussed, the narrator sometimes quotes actual-world literary figures, even on occasion overtly applying these allusions to situations in the storyworld. Especially savvy: "John Donne said *more than kisses, letters mingle souls* and so they do; Irie was alarmed to find such a commingling as this" (304). As if to underscore the ontological overlap, Smith employs a semicolon instead of a period, forcing John Donne and Irie Jones to cohabit in the confines of a single sentence. "And so they do," the narrator's outright endorsement of Donne as occasioned by Irie's alarm, completes the leveling of the worlds. The activity of these strategies is to bring the actual world, the storyworld, and the narrator closer together and thus erect a post from which the narrator can make assertions in the context of the storyworld that function as, in Culler's words, "real statements about our world."

And when such statements are an author's foremost rhetorical task, she can use her narrator's lyric moments in a primary world as mouthpieces to speak them. Smith is too shrewd to fall victim to full didacticism, but she nevertheless pokes through with transparent assertions of her own from time to time. These vary from wary directions such as "When an Englishman wants to be generous, the *first* thing you ask is why" to linguistic observations such as "*Homeland* is one of the magical fantasy words like *unicorn* and *soul* that have now passed into the language" to broad cultural critiques with noun-phrases such as "The sexual and cultural revolutions we have experienced these past two decades" (257, 296, 332). (It's worth noting that the present-tense verb-phrases accord with the "perpetual present" that, according to Culler, characterizes lyric.) These statements about our world culminate in occasional paraphrases of the

macro argument of the novel as I've delineated it above. "It's all about time," Smith reminds us, though no reader can forget in the world of *White Teeth*. Later she elaborates:

The sheer *quantity* of shit that must be wiped off the slate if we are to start again as new. Race. Land. Ownership. Faith. Theft. Blood. And more blood. And more. And not only must the *place* be neutral, but the messenger who takes you to the place, and the messenger who sends the messenger. There are no people or places like that left in North London. (378)

For "North London" read "actual world." We have the inescapable past, its pounding on the present, an acknowledgement of the historical injustices still felt today. That's the backward-looking prong of Smith's thesis. But in full it's bidirectional and ultimately optimistic, so on the final page of the novel Smith insists, lyrically, that "the end is simply the beginning of an even longer story." Together these two lyric assertions paraphrase the contention of the novel so neatly that my own effort to do so above is perhaps unnecessary. Do not lose sight of the past, Smith instructs; learn from the theft and the blood and act in accordance with those lessons, for the future depends on our every action, down to the breath, to the period.

In a sense, Smith builds a primary world in the service of issuing this forthright instruction. While it's true that some components of the lyric voice—allusion, simile—enhance the realism of the text, the lyric voice simultaneously *depends* on the primary world for its rhetorical force. The alignment of the storyworld with the actual world and the consequent bolstering of the authorial consciousness's beliefs prime the reader to receive straightforward commentary on the actual world. The primary world, then, sets the stage for the author to articulate her argument lucidly and directly to the reader within the narration. Finally, as the specifics within the "sheer quantity of shit" (blood, race, ownership) above suggest, Smith has in mind not only the general, conceptual past shared by all humankind but also the tangible histories of particular reprehensible groups—imperialists, slave owners, oppressors all. Smith's

call to remember the past is thus a call to examine our actual histories, the damage done to our and others' cultures by oppression and discrimination, the ways in which that damage is still forcible today and the possible means of amending it to reduce that force in the future. We trust Smith when she instructs us thus, and we even do as she says, because we know that the world she has built suffers from those histories too.

There remain makers of realism in *White Teeth* that I have not delineated in this chapter. The realist effect of occasional OED citations (209) and full-length bibliographical entries (330) seems obvious enough to rest unexamined, and to account for all the variations on the themes I *have* discussed would be to fall into monotonous pedantry. Here's the nub: Smith builds a world that is identical to the actual world in every important way, and that similarity generates a set of assumptions in the narrative consciousness that matches those of the authorial consciousness. As a result, the authorial consciousness is assured it of its ability to understand the storyworld with its existing beliefs; the reader, then, is guided by the primary world to interpret every element of the narrative in terms of the actual world. Rhetorically we understand this guidance as part of Smith's rhetorical design. It positions the reader to receive Smith's commentary as a direct statement about the actual world and thus ensures that the reader heeds the author's instruction to evaluate particular portions of actual history and act in response to the lessons gleaned from that evaluation. Much of this experience and interpretive action provoked by *White Teeth*'s primary world differs significantly from the experience and interpretive action provoked by what I call secondary worlds, to which I now turn.

b. *The Secondary World of Salman Rushdie's Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

Marie-Laure Ryan's *principle of minimal departure* states that we "reconstrue the world of a fiction . . . as being the closest possible to the reality we know." This "reconstruing" requires that "we project upon the world of a statement everything we know about the real world" and "make only those adjustments which we cannot avoid" ("POMD" 406). In my terms, Ryan's principle effectively means that we begin reading a narrative with the expectation that its storyworld will match the actual world; thus, even if there is no explicit appeal to the actual world in the narrative, the reader will experience the storyworld as primary in the ways outlined above, albeit minimally so.⁹ From this default we can consider the realist strategies that Smith employs *affirmations* of the reader's expectation of minimal departure, which enhance or intensify the minimal primary-world experience. The opposites of these affirmations are, to underline the obvious, *disaffirmations*, which signal to the reader that the storyworld is *unlike* the actual world in whatever way indicated by the divergent phenomenon. These disaffirmations elicit the "adjustments" to which Ryan refers, and a great enough degree of the difference they signal renders a storyworld a *secondary*.

Because we've come a long way since this chapter's thesis statement, it would be wise to pause to restate my argument about secondary worlds before we move into one. In a secondary world, significant and salient difference from the actual world signals to the authorial consciousness that its understanding, which is tethered to the constraints of the actual world, is

⁹ Ryan's argument and my inferences from it engage some interesting issues about genre expectation, branding, and so forth. My understanding though is that these extra-textual elements do not negate the principle of minimal departure (resulting in, in Thomas Pavel's words, an "expectation of maximal departure") but serve as early actors on it, simply encouraging adjustments before the actual narrative opens. Thus, in this paper's terms, classifications such as "fantasy" and "gothic" are preliminary descriptors of a text's storyworld, and any expectations that arise from them are early and vaguer versions of the same adjustments provoked by in-text extraordinary phenomena.

not sufficient for understanding the storyworld. The authorial consciousness's recognition of this condition puts the beliefs of the narrative consciousness, which correspond to the storyworld, in the driver's seat, as it were, allowing the reader to follow, enjoy, and interpret the narrative's extraordinary or impossible phenomena free of the authorial consciousness's commitment to resolving such phenomena in terms of actual-world parameters. In place of this resolution of individual elements, the authorial consciousness becomes interested in the *so what* of the construction in broader terms, and this interpretive action is oriented by the secondary world away from particulars toward the general, even universal concepts shared by the actual world and the storyworld. In the case of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Rushdie builds a secondary world to argue for the universal necessity of freedom of expression and against the danger that is tyrannical ideology. The principle of minimal departure mandates that the experience of a secondary world is inherently *progressive*, entailing as it does the *accumulation* of violations and adjustments. In an effort to responsibly observe this temporality, most of what follows is itself progressive; my analysis traces *changes* in the response to transgressions of reality by moving along with the characters through narrative episodes, bouncing between theory and practice and circling only in the end to interpretive commentary on the text as a whole. This approach makes unavoidable a good deal of summarization, but I've tried to limit such material to what is necessary to elucidate my interpretations.

Primary worlds, like all fictions, sanction some difference from the actual world: fictional characters, fabricated scenarios, even invented geographical locations can exist in a storyworld without necessitating a significant discordance with the reality we know. Thus it takes differences more noteworthy, more *fundamental*, to build a secondary world. I'll call such

differences and their particular manifestations in the storyworld *extraordinary phenomena*, a rather commonplace formulation whose definition is nonetheless grounded in some recent narrative theory—namely, the unnatural narratology of Jan Alber. Alber uses the term “unnatural” to refer to “physically, logically, and humanly impossible scenarios and events” (14). This definition still covers a good bit of ground, but limiting that ground to impossibilities guarantees that the unnatural entails some fundamental deviation from the actual world; as such, Alber’s unnatural is fit to serve as my definition of the extraordinary.¹⁰ However, because I’m concerned with the reader’s perception of the storyworld’s difference from the actual world, certain extraordinary phenomena must be *more* extraordinary—or more consequentially extraordinary—than others. Here we should draw a distinction between *violations* and *extensions* of reality. An example of a text whose extraordinary phenomena *violate* reality is Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*, in which the flow of events is reversed so that acts such as eating become regurgitation-and-assembly; an example of a text whose extraordinary phenomena *extend* reality is Aesop’s “The Wolf and the Kid,” in which a wolf sings a song to grant a baby goat its dying wish.¹¹ It’s easy to see how and why Amis’s reversal of chronology entails a greater divergence from the actual world than Aesop’s attribution of voice and sentimentality to animals—the former alters the fundamental laws, the *données*, of the actual world, whereas the latter merely adds to or combines what already exists. I want to use this distinction to delineate the kinds of

¹⁰ Why, then, would I not simply use “impossible” in place of “extraordinary”? Either would likely work in most cases, but “impossible” may occasionally become controversial in a way that distracts from the main discussion of world-building-as-rhetoric. I think, for instance, of William Gibson’s (supposed) remark that “the future is already here — it’s just not very evenly distributed.” This remark refers to the disparity between specialists’ knowledge and the knowledge of the general public, particularly as it pertains to technological phenomena. Certain things are possible for the specialists that others might consider impossible. But “extraordinary” in the context of the world writ large is satisfactory for both groups.

¹¹ These are my own arbitrary examples, though *Time’s Arrow* is a favorite of the unnatural narratologists.

extraordinary phenomena that might exist in a storyworld. Violations of actual-world laws (e.g. the reversal or halting of time, the erasure of gravitational force) are *degree one* extraordinary phenomena (the stronger), and, extensions, figures and events that do not exist in the actual world but also do not violate fundamental laws (e.g. talking animals or winged humans), are *degree two* extraordinary phenomena (the weaker). Both indicate difference from the actual world and require “adjustments” in Ryan’s sense, but the degree determines the radicalness of the difference and the extent of the responding adjustment.

I will discuss, in addition, a third suggester of difference that does not involve an empirical transgression of reality but nonetheless loosens the reader’s hold on actual-world specifications. Just as Smith uses discursive strategies such as allusion and form-content realism to ground *White Teeth* in a primary world, so can secondary-world-builders use discourse to hint at a *contrast* with reality. For one example of the near-endless possibilities, about the post-apocalyptic world the narrator in Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* says, “God had watched over children and drunks, and now he watched over no one” (139). Though this remark doesn’t mean that there was a God and He has died of plague too, it *does* evoke a cosmic notion of *difference* in the storyworld and thus provokes some hesitation on the part of the reader. (My additional examples below will clarify this category further.) Such rhetorical devices obviously entail the least radical departure from the actual world, so for ease of reference I’ll call them *degree three* extraordinary phenomena.

Of course there is not necessarily a clean boundary between these categories that renders them wholly discrete; I grant the likelihood of ambiguity and the possibility that the difference between the categories might sometimes be insignificant to our experience of the narrative as

designed. This model is simply an attempt to articulate and keep track of the ways storyworlds diverge from the actual world. I should note, in addition, that the actual-world beliefs of flesh-and-blood readers can influence the degree to which a given phenomenon registers as extraordinary. For instance, some people believe that ghosts are an empirical feature of the actual world, while others are certain that “life” begins and ends with the corporeal—for the first group a ghost would not signal much difference from the actual world, but for the second it would constitute a fundamental violation of reality. These variations are interesting in themselves and as they produce manifestly diverse readerly receptions. For the purposes of the present study, however, I want to limit my focus to the authorial consciousness’s responses to extraordinary phenomena, which (recalling Rabinowitz) are guided by the authorial agency behind the text. In other words, it’s through the author’s treatment of a phenomenon that we determine the degree of its extraordinariness. This strategy should make it possible to cut through the perspectival diversity of actual-world readers to something of a consensus concerning the world-building effects of given phenomena—how and how much they set the storyworld apart from the actual world.

The base claim of this section is that secondary worlds provide a qualitatively different reading experience from primary worlds. My test case is Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, a purported “children’s novel” that, like all great children’s literature, ultimately transcends that label tenfold. (I will say more about this, with the help of Rushdie himself, at the end of this chapter.) It tells the story of Haroun Khalifa and his father, Rashid, the “Shah of Blah,” a revered storyteller whose wife, Soraya (Haroun’s mother), leaves him because he’s too imaginative, too detached from “reality.” After she leaves, Rashid sulks, according to the

narrator, somewhat pathetically, which leads Haroun to ask in frustration, “*What’s the use of stories that aren’t even true?*” Upon heeding this question from his son, Rashid loses his ability to tell stories. As it turns out, that “ability” is more tangible than talent; it’s controlled by folks in a fantastic realm that contains the Stream of Story, through which flow, in liquid form, all tales old and new. Rashid, discouraged by his abandonment and his son’s loss of faith in fiction, “cancels” his “subscription” to the stream’s story water and therefore casts out his capacity for narrative invention. The remainder of the novel tracks Haroun’s journey through the fantastic realm in his effort to recover Rashid’s access to stories and thereby make amends for his role in its original cancellation.¹²

As that brief summary already indicates, the storyworld of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* contains two realms, one fantastic and the other profane, which functions as a sort of global degree-one extraordinary phenomenon that distinguishes the storyworld from the actual world on a general, structural level. The profane realm is “earth” by name, and the fantastic realm is in fact *earth’s second moon*, called “Kahani,” which further violates our understanding of cosmic reality. (These differences would obviously cascade consequent differences on the storyworld.) Kahani itself consists of two cities, Gup and Chup; the former is in perpetual daylight and its people (the Guppees) are talkative, while the latter is in perpetual darkness and its people (the Chupwalas) are silent. Between them lies the Twilight Strip, and beginning at the Wellspring in the “Old Zone” of Chup and running through all of Kahani is the Stream of Story, the source of narrative matter for the entire storyworld. Nearly needless to say, Kahani is populated by genies,

¹² My distribution of attention here is perhaps a little misleading. The first five sentences of my summary, from Soraya’s departure to Rashid’s cancellation of his story subscription, encompass only about sixty pages. The final 150 pages contain what I’ve alluded to in the final sentence of my summary, Haroun’s time in the fantastic realm. Haroun’s adventures therein are many; I exclude details of them here only because I will discuss those that are important from a world-building perspective in my analysis.

talking fish, telepathic birds, philosophizing flowers, and loads of other degree-two extraordinary figures, as well as additional degree-one violations of reality that we will come to in due time.

Almost everything about Kahani marks it as blatantly different from the actual world and, the idea is, from the “earth” of the storyworld as well. But by *our* standards the profane realm isn’t so loyal to reality either, and as we move through it we notice that we’re in a world very unlike ours indeed. The novel opens with a straightforward introduction to a vague storyworld.

There was once, in the country of Alifbay, a sad city, the saddest of cities,
a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its own name. (15)

Consider this beginning in contrast to that of *White Teeth*. Smith gives us time and place with remarkable precision, while Rushdie gives us the temporally ambiguous “There was once” and the confessedly (in the novel’s glossary) fabricated location “Alifbay,” preceded by “the country of,” a phrase that stresses the land’s otherness, redundant as it would be if the country were familiar to us earthlings. According to the narrator, the city itself, not its inhabitants, is sad, which is a classic instance of Ruskin’s pathetic fallacy, except that it could be *literally* true; can spaces feel emotions here? That the city has “forgotten its own name” emphasizes the ambiguity of the location and doubles down on its anthropomorphism, for a city that *forgets* is a city that must first have possessed the capacity for memory. I grant that the principle of minimal departure might make this expository anthropomorphism register as figurative, and indeed perhaps it should. But the same cannot be said for “Alifbay” and ambiguity, and we need only continue reading to be urged away from that figurative orientation.

In the north of the sad city stood mighty factories in which (so I’m told) sadness was actually manufactured, packaged and sent all over the world, which never seemed to get enough of it. Black smoke poured out of the chimneys of the sadness factories and hung over the city like bad news. (15)

A parenthetical intrusion of the first-person complicates the assertions here, marking them as secondhand and so lightly speculative, but there is no real sign of unreliability in the narration and thus no reason to look away from the narrator for more accurate reports of the storyworld. In this passage, then, an emotion, abstract and ephemeral, is concretized and harvested as industry, and we can *see* it—feeling as product, and a skyline of smokestacks shooting blankets of sullen waste over the enigmatic city. This extraordinary scene is the first to take shape before the eyes of our narrative consciousness, and when it does it forces our authorial consciousness to wonder: is this my world or another? *Is* it the city who's sad, who's lost track of its name? Even the profane side of the storyworld looks to us thoroughly foreign in its first moments under the light.

Like the realist impression of *White Teeth*'s opening, such an extraordinary first impression sticks with us,¹³ so that when we read shortly thereafter that Rashid is “a magician” we don't immediately conclude that it's a figurative description or even that his magic is, like that of our performance magicians, illusory and decodable; likewise, when we learn that his stories make the town cows “stop and cock their ears” and the monkeys “jabber approvingly from the rooftops,” the possibility lingers that Alifbay's animals understand Rashid's language and really are sensitive to the aesthetics of narrative (16). We aren't yet fully acquainted with this world, but we've had our expectation of minimal departure weakened to the point of a hesitant openness to the extraordinary. This openness is particularly important for us when Rashid explains to Haroun the source of his storytelling “magic” and thereby previews the adventures that make up the majority of the narrative. Haroun forthrightly asks, “Where do they come from really?” Then:

¹³ See Rabinowitz, *Before Reading*

‘From the great Story Sea,’ [Rashid replies], ‘I drink the warm Story Waters
And then I feel full of steam.’ . . . ‘It comes out of an invisible Tap installed
By one of the Water Genies,’ [says] Rashid with a straight face. ‘You have
To be a subscriber.’ (17)

It sounds like the sort of fantastical explanation any father might give his son about capacities the son is too green to exercise himself. “Could dad be God?” wonders Dave Matthews in “Spoon,” and parents often have a way of exploiting this dynamic to play with a child’s understanding of fantasy and reality, possibility and impossibility. Haroun, at eleven perhaps a little old for the games, remains suspicious of the explanation. We, on the other hand, are very likely less so; we’ve been primed by a generally ambiguous storyworld that’s unfamiliar where it *is* clear, and as a result we key on clues such as “with a straight face” and therefrom surmise that maybe Rashid isn’t playing games at all.

We’re soon to find that such a guess is correct, but first Rushdie sets the profane realm apart from the actual world even more. After Soraya leaves, Rashid smashes a clock, stopping it at exactly eleven o’clock; from that moment on, Haroun finds that he can’t “keep his mind on anything for very long, or, to be precise, for more than eleven minutes at a time.” He wonders then if he’s “stuck in time like a broken clock,” and though this thought is a vulgarly obvious move on Rushdie’s part, the event itself is interesting from a world-building perspective. The causal link between the broken clock and Haroun’s shortened attention span isn’t quite possible, and Rushdie takes a rare moment of precision (“to be precise . . . eleven minutes”) to insist upon that link. Recall that Smith uses precision to clearly and certainly ground moments in reality, and see that here Rushdie uses the same tactic in the opposite direction, toward an extraordinary storyworld. In more general matters these precise moments are all but nonexistent. Shortly after Haroun notices his cognitive trouble, Rashid is invited by “politicos” to deliver public stories in

other towns, namely “the Town of G and the nearby Valley of K, which is nestled in the Mountains of M” (24). “I should explain,” the narrator says,

that in the country of Alifbay many places were named after letters of the Alphabet. This led to much confusion, because there were only a limited number of letters and an almost unlimited number of places in need of names. As a result many places were obliged to share a single name. This meant that people’s letters were always going to the wrong address. (24)

Deliberate, almost obnoxiously nebulous geography reaches its summit in this nomenclature: one name literally designates multiple places, so that if a character were to say that X happened in Y we and the other characters would not know *which* Y was the location in question. In many instances, then, place names in Alifbay are useful only insofar as they *narrow down* the list of possible locations; they do not denote definitively. It’s almost a parody of the fastidious referentiality that Smith uses to set events in particular nooks in London. Furthermore, when specific geographical names *do* show face in the narration, Rushdie engages with that referentiality in an explicitly negational manner. “Dull Lake” is uniquely titled and remembered without a problem but it doesn’t exist in the actual world, so its proper name works toward otherness instead of familiarity.¹⁴ Iff the Water Genie asks Haroun, “Africa, have you seen it? No? Then is it truly there? . . . Kangaroos, Mount Fujiyama, the North Pole?” (63). Massive and general as they might be, Africa, Fujiyama, and the North Pole *are* visitable actual-world locations, but this referentiality is undermined by Iff’s usage of them as examples of places Haroun has *not* seen. I argue in section one of this chapter that it’s the characters’ interactions with referential places and things that solidify the existence of the referents within the storyworld; here, then, Haroun has emphatically *not* interacted with these places, and so their

¹⁴ There’s a Dal Lake in Srinagar and a Dull Ax Lake in Alaska but, understandably, no Dull Lake.

realist force is minimal, if existent at all. Thus even where he invokes it, Rushdie resists the actual.

I've just previewed Haroun's encounter with Iff the Water Genie without mentioning that it is, like any encounter with any genie, impossible, and it's prefaced in the narrative by other impossibilities in the preceding scenes. After Rashid fails to speak during his performance in the Town of G, he and Haroun are taken to the Valley of K, which requires a winding trek in a "Mail Coach" through the Mountains of M. Dangerously they dart along ravines and around bends, and as they near the peak of their ascent

a thick cloud, shot through with impossible, shifting colours, a cloud from a dream or a nightmare, hop[s] up from the gorge below them and plop[s] itself down on the road. (38)

The description alone suggests otherness: "impossible" yet witnessed, "from a dream" but no character is asleep. It's not terribly offensive for the vehicle to drive "through clouds" in the mountains, but for a cloud to "hop" and "plop" requires an agency and, moreover, an agility that we can't responsibly attribute to a collection of water molecules. Ultimately they survive their collision with the cloud and arrive in the Valley of K, where Rashid and Haroun are welcomed warmly and taken out on a large boat on Dull Lake. In the truly extraordinary ensuing scene, the lake water and the weather change to match the moods of the characters in the boat: "the more shrieks and yelps there [are], the rougher the waters [become]"; all go silent, and "at once the boiling breeze [falls] away, the thunder and lightning [stop]" (49). If the attribution of sadness to Haroun's hometown is pathetically fallacious in a tentative manner, the correspondence of nature with emotion in this scene is a literalized, empirical manifestation of the fallacy. By this point we're certain that this "earth" is fundamentally different from ours, and after Dull Lake even

Haroun himself admits that “the real world” is “full of magic”—though he doesn’t yet know the extent to which it is so (50).

The politicians in the Valley of K give Rashid and Haroun each a bed shaped like a peacock and a turtle, respectively, and these animal-objects lend a preliminary air of the fantastic to the setting immediately following the Dull Lake scene. Significantly unsettled by his turtle-bed, Haroun switches rooms with Rashid, which is why, the narrator then says, “the Water Genie who visited . . . that night and crept into the Peacock Room found an unsleeping boy about his own size staring him in the face.” After this brief flashforward we’re pulled in close by re-focalization (through Haroun) and a promise of exactitude: “*To be precise*,” the narrator begins, then Haroun looks toward the open and illuminated bathroom and sees “a figure almost too astonishing for words” (54, my emphasis). This figure is Iff and his appearance is later naturalized a bit, but consider the loose paradox in the rhetoric here: *to be precise* the figure is *too astonishing to be described with precision*. Like negating geographical referentiality with absence, zeroing in on its indescribability underscores the remoteness of the Genie from our actual-world frames of reference. What follows this non-description is the preparation of Haroun’s journey to Kahani.

Iff is initially unaware of Haroun, and it’s through the former’s “remarkable monologue” that we discern the Genie’s purpose and identity.

‘Put it in, take it out. The fellow comes up here, so I have to come and install it, rush job, never mind my workload. —Then, wham, bam, he cancels his subscription, and guess who has to come back and take the equipment out, right away, pronto . . . okay, let’s be methodical. —Hot tap, cold tap, go halfway in between, go up in the air six inches, and there should be your Story Tap . . . Okay. Time to Disconnect.’ (54-55)

Haroun doesn’t seem to heed this hilarious reveal at first, but for us it’s a materialization of what we already suspected was an accurate account of Rashid’s storytelling powers—the “Story Sea” explanation of thirty-seven pages previous. Iff has long sky-blue whiskers, which Haroun,

having “never seen blue hair before,” comes nearer to inspect; when he does, Iff “whirl[s] about, [spins] all the way round three times, and disappear[s]” (55). But he leaves behind his “Disconnecting Tool,” and he reappears just as Haroun retrieves the tool and refuses to return it until Iff explains what’s going on. I should stress, as we approach our decampment to Kahani, that these extraordinary phenomena—the degree-three estranging rhetoric, the degree-two genie, his degree-one disappearance and reappearance—are all occurring in the profane realm of the storyworld and thus further differentiating *Haroun’s* “earth” from ours. And they continue: the wrench-shaped Disconnecter is “more fluid than solid,” made of “liquid veins” held together by “some invisible force,” and the Story Tap it’s meant for is likewise invisible, *dinging* aloud when hit but showing no material body. Haroun is at first mesmerized by the vascular liquid-solid, but he collects himself into practicality.

The explanation he leverages out of Iff articulates what we’ve inferred from the monologue, namely that Iff has come to turn off Rashid’s access to the Story Water because he has “discontinued narrative activities,” or “cancelled his subscription.” Haroun, quite astute, is puzzled by the news of his father’s cancellation and by the process of cancellation more generally; “How did [Rashid] send the message?” he asks, reasoning that he’s “been right with [Rashid] almost all the time.” Iff’s response and the exchange that ensues are absolutely vital.

‘He sent it by the usual means,’ Iff shrugged. ‘A P2C2E.’

‘And what is that?’

‘Obvious,’ said the Water Genie with a wicked grin. ‘It’s a Process Too Complicated To Explain.’ Then he saw how upset Haroun was, and added: ‘In this case, it involves Thought Beams. We tune in and listen to his thoughts. It’s an advanced technology.’

‘Advanced or not,’ Haroun retorted, ‘you’ve made a mistake this time . . .’

‘Orders,’ said Iff. ‘All queries to be taken up with the Grand Comptroller.’ (57)

Iff then elaborates on this instruction, explaining that there is a “P2C2E House” in “Gup City, Kahani,” wherein resides “the Walrus,” who is in charge of the Processes Too Complicated To Explain. Haroun, again astute, interrogates further.

‘And how does the letter get there?’ he asked. The Water Genie giggled softly. ‘It doesn’t,’ he answered. ‘You see the beauty of the scheme.’

‘I certainly don’t,’ Haroun retorted. (58)

This conversation effectively forces an epistemological surrender. The very concept of a “Process Too Complicated To Explain” rhetorically estranges us from the storyworld, implying as it does that certain events therein can be neither understood nor articulated. And that such processes govern the narrative’s main instability—Rashid’s loss of storytelling capacity—indicates that the world of the novel differs from actual world on a foundational, almost existential level. Of course Rushdie is writing nonetheless for readers with authorial consciousnesses, with epistemological commitments to the actual world; so by attributing this global, governing impossibility to a “P2C2E” he explicitly expresses to us that the laws of the storyworld are *outside our understanding*. They must not be the point. The pseudo-explanation that Iff gives, “Thought Beams,” only solidifies the otherness of the extraordinary phenomenon, which his calling it an “advanced technology” then stresses even further. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, Haroun’s letter *will not get there*, any inquiry he pursues into the P2C2E will not only go unanswered but *entirely unobserved*. In other words, probing the processes will yield nothing but the wasted energy of the prober.

This condition gestures toward a definitive experiential quality of the secondary world: a sort of *compelled, passive belief* in the extraordinary, which I will call *secondary belief*. When Iff attributes the Story Water and surrounding extraordinary phenomena to Processes Too

Complicated To Explain, he undercuts Haroun's potential objection and coerces belief on the premise that, as far as Haroun is concerned, *it just is*. In secondary worlds such as the one Rushdie has built here, extraordinary phenomena continually contradict our expectation of minimal departure, and each of these contradictions forces our authorial consciousness to recognize difference between its norms and the storyworld's. If that difference is significant and salient, as it certainly is in *Haroun*, the authorial consciousness will ultimately realize that its conception of possible and impossible does not apply in the storyworld, that the extraordinary phenomena are not anomalous violations of ontological law but are attributable, rather, to Processes Too *Different* To Explain. Another way of putting this is that the secondary world generates a set of beliefs in the narrative consciousness that differs so significantly from the authorial consciousness's that the latter realizes it should not—indeed, cannot—approach the storyworld's extraordinary phenomena as if they were occurring in the actual world. As a result, we too have that interpretive crutch *it just is*; we can *believe* in the extraordinary phenomena our narrative consciousness observes without recourse to our authorial consciousness's insistence on resolving phenomena in terms of the actual world. The authorial consciousness does ultimately become interested in the *so what* of the invention on a macro scale, which I will attempt to illustrate later in this section, but for a moment I want to linger over this freedom from interrogating individual extraordinary phenomena.

I am indebted in different ways to a few theorists for the notion of secondary belief, the most obvious of whom is Tolkien, who uses the term itself to refer to the enchanted state that I briefly mention in the introduction to this chapter. For Tolkien, "Secondary Belief" is, as I take it, the result of a pleasurable immersion that, through pure elation, incites "belief" in the reader: he

writes, “If they really liked [a story], for itself . . . they would believe—in this sense” (61). While I value such immersion as a vital virtue of narrative, I cannot help but think that Tolkien and I mean something different when we talk about belief. Whereas he seems to assert that a great enough degree of aesthetic pleasure exempts the reader from rationalizing or objecting to impossible occurrences and thus renders belief inevitable and almost unconscious, I yoke belief to its supporting rationalization processes and thus make it necessary to examine how seemingly impossible things are occurring in the storyworld and whether we should truly believe in them. Our conclusions, which might be that a character is dreaming or that alternate laws govern the storyworld or something else entirely, can exist independent of the depth and pleasure of our immersion in the narrative, even as our belief often contributes (for better or worse) to our aesthetic experience. Belief, then, is simply *the conviction that something is indeed the case*, and it is inseparable in our critical practice from the rationale that supports it.

Relevant to that rationale is Tzvetan Todorov’s now-classic study *The Fantastic*, which outlines three ways to incorporate—or perhaps three ways to *approach*—the supernatural in fiction. What Todorov calls the *uncanny* is the apparent supernatural phenomenon for which there is actually a natural explanation, e.g. Scrooge was dreaming; by contrast, the *marvellous* is the supernatural phenomenon that exists because the story is controlled by other laws, e.g. ghosts empirically exist in the world of *A Christmas Carol*; in the middle is the *fantastic*, which is defined by a “hesitation” between the uncanny and the marvellous and exists only insofar as the reader cannot decide between natural and supernatural, between Scrooge’s dream or his spirit-world. As is surely clear, Todorov’s model is germane to my entire study, dealing as it does with interpreting the impossible and negating actual-world laws, but for now I want to highlight the

marvellous, the essence of which is that the reader decides upon encountering the supernatural that “new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena” (41). In a sense, this marvellous entails the same process as does secondary belief. But Todorov’s model in its base form doesn’t go quite far enough. Entertaining new laws of nature to account for phenomena is the reader’s foundational response to the truly impossible (so *not* the uncanny), and there are degrees of this response that correspond to greater and lesser differentiations from the actual world. Some authors write of a single, perhaps even unimportant impossible figure for which there is no natural explanation, while others, such as Rushdie in *Haroun*, employ salient extraordinary phenomena that force the reader to entertain a great many new possibilities. Both of these instances would count, for Todorov, as marvellous, but we would not respond to them in identical ways. My point, then, is that certain narratives are *more marvellous* than others—and secondary belief is the marvellous response scaled up to the macro level of the storyworld.

Lastly, I return to Jan Alber and unnatural narratology. Alber offers nine “reading strategies” for making sense of the unnatural, three of which are especially pertinent to the belief we experience in secondary worlds. Strategy two is what Alber calls “Generification,” or “accounting for the unnatural element by identifying it as belonging to a particular literary genre”; strategy seven is “Positing a transcendental realm,” or explaining “projected impossibilities by assuming that they are part of a transcendental realm”; strategy nine, the final and in some ways most radical option, is “The Zen way of reading,” which involves merely *accepting* impossibilities and the resulting cognitive experiences (fear, joy, confusion, et cetera) (UN 42-46). Something about each of these strategies irks its alignment with secondary belief: the principles I’m attempting to outline operate independent of genres and their conventions; the

“transcendental realms” to which Alber refers are primarily spiritual, such as Heaven or Hell; and the straightaway acceptance of impossibilities neglects the interpretive aspect of literary reading (Tolkien’s Secondary Belief does this too), which is perhaps the main focus of this study. But combining other facets of the strategies yields a relatively complete illustration of secondary belief. Generification is about “the construction of a supportive context” that “helps us come to terms with represented impossibilities.” The storyworld that is clearly and certainly *not* the actual world functions as this supportive context, and, though it isn’t Heaven or Hell, its liberation from actual-world laws does indeed mean that such a context *transcends* the limits of our reality. When our authorial consciousness recognizes this transcendence, it surrenders its authority over what’s possible and impossible, which licenses that *it just is*, a far more “Zen way of reading” than we can rightfully carry out in a world more like our own. Secondary belief is therefore a conglomeration of unnatural reading strategies two, seven, and nine.

Haroun and the Sea of Stories provides an interesting test case for secondary worlds and their experiential offerings because the storyworld permits traffic between its two realms, and when Haroun travels from Alifbay to Kahani for the first time he undergoes something like what we experience when we recognize the difference of the storyworld from the actual world. Here, then, I turn to a second progression. In the beginning of Haroun’s encounters with Iff, other Kahani natives, and the second moon itself, he frequently misapplies his “earthly” norms to the bizarre things he’s witnessing. After learning about Rashid’s cancellation, the Processes Too Complicated To Explain, and the Walrus who controls such processes, Haroun uses the Disconnecter Tool to coax Iff into taking him to see the Walrus so that he can renew Rashid’s Story Water subscription—he will not return the Tool otherwise. For the trip to Kahani they’ll

need transportation, so Iff commands, “Pick a bird . . . Any bird.” Haroun sees no birds, only the “wooden peacock” that was his bed, and this naiveté irritates the Water Genie:

Iff gave a snort of disgust. ‘A person may choose what he cannot see,’ he said, as if explaining something very obvious to a very foolish individual. ‘A person may even select a flying creature of his own invention, for example winged horse, flying turtle, airborne whale, space serpent, aeromouse.’ (63)

The tone established by “a snort of disgust,” “something very obvious,” and “very foolish person” hints at Haroun’s ignorance of the storyworld’s laws from the outset. The suggestion that one can invent creatures, if true and not a reference to plastic or putty, is doubly extraordinary: degree-two products, degree-one capability. It comes across as such for Haroun too, for the laws of his earth, *as he understands them*, forbid such phenomena. And in those terms he forthrightly objects: “That may be true where you come from . . . But in these parts *stricter rules apply*” (63, my emphasis). (He seems not to apprehend what Iff’s intrusion into the profane realm has done to these “stricter rules,” i.e. exposed them as flimsy at best.) Of course he’s wrong; a number of tiny “fabulous winged creatures” spawn in Iff’s palm, Haroun makes a selection, then Iff “hurl[s]” the chosen bird “into the night.” Needlessly rambunctious, this action annoys (and confuses) Haroun:

‘What did you do that for?’ hissed Haroun, not wishing to wake his father; at which Iff gave his wicked grin. ‘A foolish notion,’ he said innocently. ‘A fancy, a passing whim. Certainly not because I know more about such matters than you, dear me, no.’ (64)

Obvious irony in Iff’s response pokes fun at Haroun’s ignorance and underscores it in the process; the “wicked grin” and the adverb “innocently” suggest that Iff is playfully mocking Haroun, and the actual meaning behind the statements’ irony, that Iff knows the ins and outs of the storyworld better than Haroun, solidifies the impossible Water Genie from earth’s impossible

second moon as the general authority in this relationship. Iff, unlike Haroun, knows that when he throws the tiny bird into the night it'll grow large, fit for a trip through space.

Much of the initial trip to and through Kahani contains an even more obvious push-pull between Haroun's "earthly" expectations and Kahani's continual violations thereof. "Surely the earth has only one moon," Haroun objects, as Iff and Butt the Hoopoe (the transportation bird) explain the extraordinary cosmic arrangement of the storyworld. Haroun feels that they're not flying but floating in an "*impossible*, blurry space." As the trio approaches Kahani, the moon's surface shows in "colours such as Haroun could *never have imagined*." A little later, Iff and Butt say hello to Mali the "floating gardener," and Haroun responds, "You mean a floating garden." Rushdie's rhetoric in this exchange twice underlines Mali's otherness: when Haroun asks what Mali *is*, Iff says, "Floating Gardener, *naturally*"; after Haroun's objection, Mali runs "over the surface of the water, *showing no signs of sinking*." In the first case "*naturally*" is attached to a figure that Haroun (and we) would not consider natural at all, and in the second case by stating that Mali shows "no sign of sinking" the narrator preemptively overrides Haroun's (and our) expectation that such a figure would be incapable of walking on water. Finally, Haroun notes of Butt the Hoopoe, "No bird could fly so fast." About that, in fact, he's correct, for Hoopoe is a strange mechanical bird—a sentient plane?—that possesses all sorts of powers that earthly birds (or planes) do not have. For example, *telepathy*, that classic superpower on which so much science fiction has been built.

‘You can read my mind,’ Haroun said, somewhat accusingly, because it wasn’t entirely a pleasant feeling to have one’s private ruminations bugged by a mechanical bird. ‘But but but certainly,’ answered the Hoopoe. ‘Also I am communicating with you *telepathically*, because as you may observe I am not moving my beak . . .’ (66)

Telepathy is a degree-one extraordinary phenomenon that Rushdie also exploits in *Midnight's Children*, tellingly a text often cited by Alber and Brian Richardson as prototypically unnatural. This telepathy, however, is even more extraordinary than *Midnight's Children's* because here a *mechanical bird* reads the mind of Haroun, a human, without the consent of the latter, then forcibly relays that reading in a telepathic language in which Haroun has no idea he's capable of engaging. The narrative (quite fittingly) withholds answers as to who exactly possesses telepathic capability, where it can be exercised, and under what circumstances it manifests, but, in any case, we have to entertain a great degree of extraordinariness to accommodate this complicated and confusing telepathy. Haroun finds it confusing too. "How are you doing that?" he demands, then "back [comes] the inevitable answer . . . A P2C2E." The answer is *inevitable*, never a chance for revelatory remark. Recognizing the insurmountable obstacle that is the Process Too Complicated To Explain, Haroun throws in the epistemological towel: "I give up" (65-67, 82).

He reiterates that surrender somewhat sullenly elsewhere. For example: "I don't think I'll ever get the hang of this place." Yet implicit in these remarks is a resilience, for it's only through *repeated* failure to understand that he could be driven to such a conclusion. And, sure enough, he persists further, so that after a single page containing phrases such as "Haroun noted," "Haroun deduced," and "Haroun worked out," he can reflect, "It's amazing what you can get accustomed to, and at what speed . . . This new world, these new friends: I've just arrived, and already none of it seems very strange at all" (85-87). What's happened here is Haroun has achieved something very like secondary belief. I won't go so far as to argue that Haroun has a narrative consciousness and an authorial consciousness, because it's *life* for him, not literature, so Kahani's extraordinariness amends his actual understanding of reality. But the parallel is clear. The

conception of reality with which Haroun entered Kahani has been repeatedly violated by what he sees as extraordinary phenomena; as we've seen, he tries to apply his "earthly" frameworks to the phenomena he's witnessing, and when it doesn't work he becomes frustrated. Gradually, however, he realizes that those frameworks are insufficient and *adjusts* them so that he has a new set of beliefs that correspond to and accommodate what he's witnessed in Kahani. Likewise, we enter the storyworld of *Haroun* with an expectation of minimal departure, and after that expectation is sufficiently contradicted by the "earth" of Alifbay, our authorial consciousness dispenses with its commitments to actual-world parameters in favor of the beliefs that the narrative consciousness has developed through observation of the extraordinary storyworld.

It becomes important for Haroun as well as for us to have achieved this state by the time of the two-pronged, climactic mission to rescue Batcheat, Princess of Gup, from captivity in Chup City and to stop the pollution and plugging of the Story Stream that's occurring in Chup's "Old Zone." The head of the land of Chup and thus the one responsible for Batcheat's kidnapping and the ruination of the Story Stream is Khattam-Shud, whose name means "completely finished" in Hindustani (according to the novel's glossary) and who is, according to Rashid, "the Arch-Enemy of all Stories" (39). He poses so great a threat and challenge to Haroun and the Guppees because he's able to be present in both Chup City and the Old Zone *at once*, which means he can oversee and operate both assaults simultaneously. This violation of perhaps our most fundamental law is possible because Khattam-Shud has managed to *separate from his own shadow*, permitting one entity to handle the plug and the pollution while the other maintains Batcheat's captivity. And the entities are nearly identical after the split—upright, three-dimensional, and like-countenanced—so it's unknown to the Guppees which entity handles

which enterprise; that's one more (essential) thing they must figure out as they go. A degree-one extraordinary phenomenon is thus the foundation, the *source*, of the novel's final and most momentous episodes.

That theme persists as the episodes progress so that, in contrast to the inseparability of *White Teeth*'s final scenes from the actual world, *Haroun*'s climactic scenes depend at every step on the extraordinary. Haroun volunteers to lead the charge in one prong of the mission, and he and his crew (including Iff, Butt, and Mali the Floating Gardner) are assigned the salvation of the Story Stream. Their race to the Old Zone is intertwined with a number of extraordinary phenomena, some of which directly invert reality and realist techniques. For example, upon his initial arrival in Chup he finds a "warrior," Mudra, whose eyes have black scleras, grey irises, and white pupils—our ophthalmological opposite (124). This feature is a function of Chup's illumination, which is to say its darkness: "They must be blind as bats in the sunlight," Haroun reasons, "because their eyes are the wrong way round" (124). The Chups accommodate this visual predicament by actually *manufacturing* darkness in "dark bulbs," clearly flipping our actual-world convention on its head and turning a *lack* (of light) into a material *substance* in the process. The "pollution" of the stories becomes apparent as they near the Old Zone and the colorful stream turns to indistinguishable dark. In those black-water areas the "poison . . . behaves like a powerful acid," eating away Iff's slipper that falls "from, to be precise, his left foot." There, again, Rushdie reverses the mechanical realism of Smith, using the rhetoric of precision to make clearer an impossible phenomenon. Finally, as Haroun and his troop approach the Old Zone, a "Web of Night" physically binds them with a kind of material darkness; once trapped, Haroun and company are "drawn along by invisible but powerful super-strings of some

sort” (142-150). This impossible web makes the crew captives of a kind, and they’re pulled against their will to the “dark ship” that houses the plug and pollution operations. There they are, in effect, captured enemies.

Like the well-timed realism in Smith’s primary world, that these extraordinary phenomena enable, complicate, catalyze, or otherwise affect *Haroun*’s culminating episode does enhance the storyworld’s secondary-ness, but what’s more important is that the extraordinary has ceased to be shocking or disruptive. Haroun is quite literally *on a mission*, and for the sake of his effectiveness as a captain he must work with, through, and around these extraordinary phenomena, rather than meddle in puzzlement at their violational nature. Free of his commitment to “earthly” reality, Haroun can interpret Kahani in terms of its laws and act in response to those interpretations. In that vein consider this, from Haroun’s face-to-face meeting with Khatam-Shud:

‘I have never in my life seen such a shadow,’ Haroun had to admit; but his conviction that it was, indeed, the Cultmaster’s shadow-self that had come to the Old Zone in this dark ship continued to grow. (154)

Haroun of course means never in his life *on “earth”* has he seen such a shadow. But his “conviction” persists that he’s dealing with “the Cultmaster’s shadow-self” despite the impossibility of fitting this figure within an “earthly” understanding of shadows. By explicitly articulating that persistence Rushdie outlines exactly the abandonment of “reality” that I’m talking about. Moreover, and most importantly, Haroun’s recognition that this Khatam-Shud is the shadow-half—a recognition enabled by cognitive repositioning outside “earthly” parameters—facilitates the reasoned decision that initiates the narrative’s (literally) global resolution. That decision and the resolution that follows depend on two extraordinary substances, and they unfold in the following episode. To properly delineate it I must backtrack slightly.

The “dark ship” is a sort of “factory ship” in which Khattam-Shud and his minions concoct the poison they release into the Story Stream and engineer the plug they plan to shove into the Stream’s “Wellspring.” As Haroun and his crew, forced along by Khattam-Shud’s men, board the ship, Iff pushes into Haroun’s hand “A little emergency something, courtesy of the P2C2E House.” “Maybe you’ll get a chance to use it,” he says (148-9). We might consider this moment parallel to the scene in *White Teeth* that presages Millat’s uprising: Iff anticipates an emergency, an extreme action, and because he (a Kahani native) knows the storyworld better than we do, we adopt that anticipation, thus charging this pre-climactic moment with suspense. However, the difference of this strategy, its opposite-directionality, from a world-building perspective is equally clear: Millat is motivated by actual-world ideology, cognitively impaired by a prevalent actual-world substance, and nestled among the actual-world statues in Trafalgar Square; Iff and Haroun, on the other hand, are boarding a nonexistent ship on “earth’s second moon” whereon shadows brew poison to ruin an impossible stream, and the “emergency” substance responsible for the suspense is attributed to a manufacturer named for its remoteness from articulation and understanding (P2C2E House). One weaves together the narrative action and the actual world, while the other redoubles the impossibility of the action taking place in any realistic context. Eventually the captors take Haroun and company to the Chup leader, Khattam-Shud, who decides he’ll let the captives “see what [they] came to see” before he disposes of them. Khattam-Shud leads them thus into the “cavern” beneath the ship, which he lights in a “dim twilight” for the captives’ sake, and begins to explain the operation. He explains the poisons (love stories are shot through with hate, et cetera), reveals his plan to “Plug the Wellspring itself,” and arrives finally at the “Generator,” which supplies power to the entire

operation. This final information he relays too loudly, I take it, because it triggers a reaction from without the ship. Mali, having escaped captivity by “reassuming the appearance of a bunch of lifeless roots,” contorts himself to squeeze through a porthole and starts for the Generator; before Khattam-Shud’s men can stop him, he flings “roots and tendrils all over the Generator, getting into every nook and cranny of the machine.” This attack ruins the Generator “beyond hope of a quick repair,” cuts off the power supply to the entire ship, and brings the whole operation to a standstill. Haroun here senses his chance (160-4). The “emergency something” from Iff, a “Bite-A-Lite,” is still under his tongue, and he quickly puts it to use.

The light that poured out from his mouth was as bright as the sun! The Chupwalas all around him were blinded . . .

Haroun moved as fast as he’d ever moved in his life. He took the Bite-a-Lite out of his mouth and held it over his head; now the light poured in every direction, illuminating the entire vast interior of the ship. (166)

The extraordinary Bite-a-Lite—a degree-two extension of the break-to-light glow stick—allows Haroun to retrieve unbothered a diving suit that will protect him from the poisoned, acidic waters on his escape, and it facilitates a realization that compounds his previous recognition of Khattam-Shud’s shadow:

[Haroun] also noticed that *none of the Chupwalas had shadows!* That could only mean one thing: Khattam-Shud had shown his most trusted devotees . . . how to detach themselves from their shadows, just like himself. ‘So they are all shadows here,’ he understood. (166)

This realization then expands to cover the whole setting: “The whole vessel seemed to quiver for a moment, to become a little less solid.” The entire poison-and-plug prong of the Chup purpose is made of shadows. Thus Haroun concludes, “If only the sun would come out . . . they’d all melt away, they’d become flat and shapeless, like the shadows they really are!” (166).

It’s this logic that motivates Haroun’s final decision which, with the help of another extraordinary substance, accomplishes the mission in favor of the Guppees. Under the cover of

his bitten light Haroun escapes to the water, and on his ascent to the surface, “seemingly by chance,” his hand brushes his thigh-pocket and feels a bulge. After brief confusion, he remembers what’s there:

The bottle was still half-full of the magical golden liquid which Iff the Water Genie had offered him what seemed like years earlier. *Wishwater*. ‘The harder you wish, the better it works,’ Iff had told him. ‘Do serious business, and the Wishwater will do serious business for you.’ (170)

Urged on by his interpretation of the Old Zone as shadow-run, Haroun gulps every drop of the Wishwater and wishes that “this Moon, Kahani” would “turn, this very instant, in such a way that the sun shines down on the Dark Ship, the full, hot, noonday sun” (170). Residue evidently remains from actual-world physics, for when Haroun’s wish comes true the shadows dominating the Old Zone begin to fade, gradually disappearing as shadows really do when high noon comes. The plug-and-poison operation cannot sustain itself in sunlight and, what’s more, its ruination in this instant is irreversible, because each shadow, willfully severed from its flesh-and-blood counterpart, has no empirical body to be the shadow *of* in the future. Haroun and his crew have saved the Stream of Story. Meanwhile in Chup City, the other half of the Guppee troop is engaged in a classic sort of city-liberation when Haroun raises the sun that destroys the town. Chup City does not *disappear*, for it’s made of material and not shadows, but the “Black Ice” covering the city melts, as do the buildings and other structures, all of which are unsuitable for the heat of sunlight; the Guppees there, of course, are quite used to the heat. The retrieval of Princess Batcheat is therefore a painless enterprise that completes, perhaps simultaneously with the first, the second prong of the Guppee mission.

The important point here is this one: just as Khattam-Shud’s separation from his shadow creates the instability that drives the latter portion of the narrative, so do the Bite-a-Lite and the

Wishwater beget the resolution of that same instability. In other words, it's extraordinary phenomena all the way down. A comparison with Smith is again useful: whereas *White Teeth* forces us to revisit the referential frame of World War II to reach the narrative's resolution, *Haroun*, running opposite, gives us no choice but to consent to the power of Wishwater (and all the other extraordinary phenomena) if we wish to reach the narrative's conclusion. The secondary-world narrative is as dependent on the unreal, the *cannot be*, as the primary-world narrative is on the real, the *can be*, the *is*. Furthermore, if the purpose of Smith's primary world is to shuttle the story directly to the authorial consciousness, encouraging us to apply our actual-world understanding to every element of the narrative, the purpose of Rushdie's secondary world is to curtail or at least delay the understanding of our authorial consciousness, rendering its categorization of phenomena as impossible unimportant to the progression of the narrative itself. It would be counterproductive to our experience of the secondary world if we stopped to interrogate its extraordinary phenomena. We've already concluded that they're Too Different To Explain, and probing them merely distracts from what Rushdie wants us to heed: in the case of the Wishwater, it's the sea-change bestowed upon the storyworld by sunrise; in other cases, it's other things equally apart from the laws of the actual world.

We can once again look to Haroun's experience for a parallel to ours. After the adventure the Walrus at the P2C2E House offers Haroun a gift: "We grant you the right to ask of us whatever favour you desire," the Walrus says, "and we promise to grant it if we possibly can, even if it means inventing a brand-new Process Too Complicated to Explain." When it becomes clear that Haroun wants "a happy ending," the Walrus excitedly reveals, overriding the skepticism of Haroun, that such a wish will be no problem at all.

‘It is precisely because happy endings are so rare,’ the Walrus continued, ‘that we at P2C2E House have learnt how to synthesize them artificially. In plain language: *we can make them up.*’

‘That’s impossible,’ Haroun protested. ‘They aren’t things you can put in bottles.’ but then he added, uncertainly, ‘Are they?’

‘If Khatam-Shud could synthesize anti-stories,’ said the Walrus with just a hint of injured pride, ‘I should think you’d accept that we can synthesize things, too. As for “impossible,”’ he went on, ‘most people would say that everything that’s happened to you lately is quite, quite impossible. Why make a fuss about this particular thing?’ (201-2)

This final question is quite a good one, and it’s rhetorically effective in the exchange. “Very well, then,” Haroun replies after a pause, and he goes on to unpack the particular happy ending for which he wishes: a restoration of happiness to his sad, forgetful hometown in Alifbay. In other words, noticing, on the basis of the extraordinary context in which he finds himself, that it would be silly to object, Haroun surrenders his conception of possible and impossible and assents to the offering at hand. So, too, do we in the secondary world.

Yet we must still consider *why* Rushdie might have chosen to build the secondary world of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*; “children’s book” or not, I don’t think *imagination* is a sufficient explanation. In talk *about* this book Rushdie himself has hinted that a significance far greater than whims and fancies lies beneath the fantastical surface. “This tiny little book could end up being the thing that I get remembered by,” he told *The New York Times* in 2009, referring to the afterlife *Haroun* has enjoyed as a play at London’s National Theatre and an opera at New York’s Lincoln Center. From the same interview: “There’s a great pleasure in writing for children. And then, of course, *you find out that you’ve written for everyone else*” (my emphasis). The *reception* of the novel, in other words, transcends its designation as children’s literature. But what about its *construction*, Rushdie’s rhetorical purpose and design? *Haroun* was published in 1990, and Rushdie claims that he wrote it *for* his young son, his only intended “audience of one.” There was, however, an issue looming rather large in Rushdie’s life in 1990, one I’ve

conveniently had the chance to survey already this chapter: the 1989 Fatwa ordering his murder and the maximum-security life he would lead for a decade following. And Rushdie has indeed spoken about *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* as a sort of response to that situation: he wrote it, he says, “at the height of the troubles surrounding *The Satanic Verses*,” and it struck him as “the most useful way of approaching that very big matter in [his] life” (*WGBH*). The implicit claim here would seem to be that an argument about those “troubles” backs the rhetorical construction of the novel. When he tells *TIME* magazine, then, that “a young person can read [*Haroun*] and get one kind of pleasure, and an adult can read it and get a slightly different kind of pleasure,” he likely means by this latter pleasure the comprehension of (and, ideally, agreement with) his argument about the fatwa and its surrounding issues—namely, religious extremism, ideological tyranny, and freedom of expression.

We cannot always perfectly tailor our interpretation or experience of a text to the remarks of its flesh-and-blood author, but it’s not difficult to find in *Haroun* the argument that Rushdie implies extra-textually. For example, the binary opposition that governs the entire storyworld is speech and silence; this is apparent not only in the topography of Kahani, which is divided into silent Chup and gregarious Gup, but also in Rashid’s loss of storytelling and more generally in the notion of “Story Water” that can be ruined or discontinued. Throughout the narrative there are riffs on this binary that more explicitly suggest the particular brand of speech-silence battling that Rushdie endured. Khattam-Shud, as we know, “opposes Speech for any reason,” so he imposes “Silence Laws” on the Chupwalas; that he is often referred to as “the Cultmaster” indicates that he is not a solo silencer but the head of a community with agnate disdain for verbal expression (101). That community has a figurehead called Bezeban, a silence god of sorts to

worship. However, Mudra the shadow warrior warns Haroun and company, “Don’t think all Chupwalas follow Khattam-Shud or worship his Bezeban.” Rather, most are “simply terrified of the Cultmaster’s great powers of sorcery” (132). This information shifts blame from the large community to the individual leader, which, for Rushdie, appropriately excuses ordinary and innocent religious people and ensures that his argument heads only for the tyrannical Ayatollah and his fundamentalist endorsers. The severity with which the novel’s fundamentalists, Khattam-Shud’s devotees, will defend the Cultmaster’s principles further aligns the Chupwala arrangement with religious extremism. For example, in Chup City the Guppees are met by an “ambassador” who is to entertain them; he begins to juggle, and among the airborne objects Blabbermouth, the Guppee page, spots a bomb. She intercepts it, throws it over the hillside, and exclaims: “He was ready to *commit suicide*, to get blown up *right alongside us*” (183). We’re familiar with this absolute apogee of ideological conviction, devotion to the point of murderous self-sacrifice, as it manifests in actual-world suicide-bombings. As for the leader himself, on multiple occasions Rushdie has described Ayatollah Khomeini in very unthreatening terms of brittleness and decrepitude (Khomeini was eighty-six and already severely ill when he issued the fatwa, and he died only four months later).¹⁵ Accordingly, the narrator of *Haroun* describes Khattam-Shud as “unimpressive,” a “skinny, scrawny, measly, weaselly, snivelling clerical type,” and Haroun himself wonders, “*That’s him? . . . This little minging fellow?*” (153). Such likenesses considered, it’s difficult to deny that Khattam-Shud is a stand-in for Khomeini. A fuller portrait of Rushdie’s take on Khomeini is thus revealed by Khattam-Shud’s explanation of his motive to Haroun.

¹⁵ See especially *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*

‘Why do you hate stories so much?’ Haroun blurted . . . ‘Stories are fun.’

‘The world, however, is not for Fun,’ Khattam-Shud replied. ‘The World is for Controlling’

‘Which world?’ Haroun made himself ask.

‘Your world, my world, all worlds,’ came the reply. ‘They are all there to be Ruled. And inside every single story inside every single Stream in the Ocean, there lies a world, a story-world, that I cannot Rule at all. And that is the reason why.’ (161)

It is indeed one of the foundational functions of literature to, as the Russian Formalists would have it, estrange us from our preconceptions about the world, and in this sense Khattam-Shud is quite right: how could he establish ideological homogeneity, how could he Control the World, if stories continually challenge and even change the beliefs of individuals? Of course he never could, so he plots the ruination of narrative. Therein, too, lies Rushdie’s argument about the fatwa: *Islamist extremists condemned him to death because he told a story that disrupts the ideology they wish to impose on the rest of the world, and both the desire to control in this manner and the silencing strategy used to achieve it are reprehensible. Furthermore, silencing itself violates not only a legal right (which we all know) but also a fundamental human pleasure, communicative tool, affective engagement, and cognitive exercise.* At a 2015 reading of *Haroun* Rushdie said, “We are storytelling creatures, you know, we’re the only species on the planet that does this very weird thing of telling itself stories in order to understand what kind of a creature it is” (*VermontReads*). Thus to eradicate stories is in some significant sense to eradicate the human. Ultimately, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is a narrative that communicates the necessity of freedom of expression while warning against the dangers of religious extremism and ideological tyranny. When the freethinking, storytelling Guppies prevail, then, we have the triumph of bardic liberty. And when every instability in the storyworld is resolved into a “happy ending”—Soraya comes back, peace in Kahani is restored, Haroun’s town remembers its name—we have an optimistic bid for the indestructibility of speech, the eternity of personal expression.

But the important question remains: why build a secondary world for this purpose? Why not simply tell the fatwa story as it happened, as Rushdie would indeed do twenty-three years later in *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*? There are trite answers that are nonetheless likely valid: Salman *had* promised his young son a book, and writing a formal candid chastisement of Khomeini a mere year after the fatwa would only have stoked the fire from which he was already hiding. But, appropriate as *Haroun* must have been for the boy and safely evasive as it is with actual-world references, I do not think these factors make up the full story. When Haroun initially enters the Dark Ship and observes the Chupwala operation, he says to Iff, “‘How weird . . . that the worst things of all can look so normal and, well, *dull*’” (152). In this remark there is something, I believe, of Rushdie’s assessment of his situation. His life in “hiding”—which he describes as more heavy-guarding than stealth-crawling—*was* probably a bit *dull*: he could no longer be the socialite he once was, a public London intellectual, at least not to the same enjoyable extent; and the very purpose of security is to preclude any of the encounters we might consider entertaining in the action-film fashion. So it’s not difficult to imagine how and why *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* might be an antidote to that dullness, a “useful way of writing about that very big matter.” The little novel is full of magic and children’s fantasies in manners manyfold—anti-dullness—and the world that contains it all is incontestably different from the actual world, the mundane, in almost every way. Such a frame creates a separation between the storyworld and the actual world that frees the former from any particular obligation to the latter—an obligation that includes historical and geographical accuracy, biological and anatomical properties, physical and logical laws, and so forth. As a result, Rushdie can render his commentary on the fatwa situation entertainingly and excitingly, with the aesthetic, affective, and

cognitive effects of imaginative literature, rather than with the informative and truth-constrained journalistic form into which his subject has so often been squeezed to reductive effect. The extraordinary norms of *Haroun's* storyworld are a *radical refusal* of the potentially bland journalistic nature of the situation and its record. Such is the first and most obvious affordance of the secondary world.

The second and more important affordance is tied up with the differentiating effects I've delineated throughout this chapter. Freedom from the constraints of reality, while it allows Rushdie to treat the fatwa more entertainingly, also allows him to *cut through* that subject to the more general issues that lie behind it. We're discouraged by the secondary world to apply our actual-world understanding to individual extraordinary phenomena, so when we seek to understand the communicative act that is the text we must consider the narrative in broader terms. The purpose of this nudge toward the broad is to *clear our path* to locating *conceptual equivalence* between the observations of the narrative consciousness and the world of the authorial consciousness. In *White Teeth* Smith and her characters interact with actual-world figures, artifacts, ideas, places, and so forth, and these interactions contend with our authorial consciousness's parallel interactions so that part of our assessment of the text involves its treatment of actual-world particulars. By contrast, *Haroun* contains *none* of these particulars; extraordinary phenomena push us into secondary belief, which is the surrender of the laws that comprise the actual-world's foundation. There is therefore nothing for our interpretive action to snag on, no impossibility to resolve nor particular opinion with which to contend, as it moves toward the general concepts or ideas dealt with in the text. In *Haroun* this means that we see not Rushdie versus Khomeini but storytellers versus silencers, expression versus censorship,

freedom versus totalitarianism. Primary worlds can of course suggest the general or conceptual too, but they do so with less immediacy; in the secondary world of *Haroun* we consider the characters' conflicts not as individual instances that might represent a grander issue (like we would in a primary world) but as *the concepts themselves in-conflict*. The novel's ungrammatical capitalization of words such as Story, Rule, and Control seems only to support this reading: not common nouns but proper ones, not particular but general. Like the difference between a truth and Truth.

A language has existed for this notion in literary criticism for quite a long time, namely in the *tenor* and *vehicle* of metaphor. But I do not think the conceptual equivalence of secondary worlds is limited to metaphor, nor to metaphor's bigger and broader brother, allegory. Metaphor and allegory depend to some degree on the figurative meaning eclipsing the literal one—the vehicle is a way *to* the tenor but not the thing itself, and if we don't notice the tenor we've failed to heed the text as designed. In *Haroun*, however, the vehicle in some places contains the tenor within it, which makes the difference between them barely noticeable. The concern about freedom of expression, for example, is discussed on many occasions by Haroun, Rashid, and Khattam-Shud; likewise, the debate over the value of narrative is explicit in the question that sets it all in motion, “*What's the use of stories that aren't even true?*” Haroun forthrightly answers this question (stories are fun) and Khattam-Shud implies an answer by saying that stories shirk his shot at full control. Even the characteristics of Khattam-Shud that liken him to Khomeini are the same in both worlds: to be “clerical” is to be clerical, to lead a cultic group of extremists is to be the “Cultmaster.” The overt presence of these concepts within the storyworld complicates an equation of the secondary world with metaphor and allegory by rendering less-than-necessary the

interpretive journey from vehicle to tenor. Rushdie's comments about *Haroun* and the fatwa are convenient for us, but couldn't we imagine knowing nothing of Rushdie's fatwa—or, indeed, nothing of any actual-world speech-stifling—and still arriving at the same conclusions about freedom, storytelling, and tyrannical ideology by *Haroun*'s end? My answer is *yes*, because the concepts transcend the particulars. To retain them explicitly in a storyworld so remote from us is only to underscore this transcendence, which is, of course, an intentional consequence of building the world.

To be clear: many secondary worlds *will* be built in the service of allegory, just as others will be built in the service of something apart from anything discussed here. Some (such as *Haroun*) will have actual-world scenarios for analogues, but many will not. I could never perform a rhetorical reading of every secondary-world narrative; they make up most of hard fantasy, much of other speculative modes such as science fiction, many children's stories, and even some literary fiction, especially in the particularly experimental corners of postmodernism. I can, however, outline the baseline status of the secondary world and the path thereto, as I've attempted to do in this chapter. Extraordinary phenomena mark the storyworld as fundamentally different from the actual world; these differences compile, and a significant and salient degree of difference signals to the authorial consciousness that its understanding of the (actual) world is not sufficient for understanding the storyworld. As a result, the authorial consciousness *backs off*, as it were, allowing the extraordinary observations of the narrative consciousness to pass unchallenged, on the basis of the storyworld's difference. This is a kind of passive belief, which I call secondary belief. The effect of secondary belief is first to allow us to follow, enjoy, and interpret the narrative progression free of our authorial consciousness's commitments to actual-

world norms. Ultimately, secondary belief compels a broadened interpretive view, encourages us toward the general: we move through what *could* have been filled with stops related to the actual world straight to the *concepts* behind the narrative construction. This arrangement is both permitted by and supportive of the generality of the concepts. In the case of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Rushdie builds a secondary world in an effort to excitingly and entertainingly communicate the universal importance of freedom of expression and the universal danger of forced, homogenous ideology.

In the following chapter, I turn to the *hybrid world*, the combination of realism and extraordinary phenomena, the middle-ground between *White Teeth* and the Sea of the Stories.

III. The Halfway Point: Hybrid Worlds

How now, Horatio! You tremble and look pale.
Is not this something more than fantasy?
What think you on't?

Before my God, I might not believe
Without the sensible and true avouch
Of mine own eyes.

— Bernardo & Horatio, *Hamlet* (I.i)

I don't try to make you believe something you won't
believe, but to make you do something you won't do.

— Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

The plot is well-known in contemporary America due mainly to the blockbuster Brad Pitt / Cate Blanchett film, but almost ninety years before the screen “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” was a short tale by a budding F. Scott Fitzgerald, one that differs significantly from the longer-form fictions for which Fitzgerald has become so imperative in secondary schools and universities. “Curious” is one way to put it: Benjamin Button is born an old man and “ages” in reverse to infancy, and he is the only person in history (his or ours) afflicted with such a condition. This latter fact gestures already toward the topic of this chapter, namely the territory between primary-world realism and secondary-world fantasy, for which “Benjamin Button” is my test case. In the analysis to come I delineate the *hybrid world*, beginning with a survey of

how Fitzgerald grounds his narrative in a realist world and moving to the arrival of Benjamin, the storyworld's sole extraordinary phenomenon; then comes a discussion of the narrative and authorial consciousnesses' reactions to the world's arrangement. During these first moves I beg a long memory from my reader, for the principles laid out in relation to *White Teeth* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* are useful here too, either by analogy or by contrast. I argue first that the hybrid world's realism bolsters the authorial consciousness, encouraging the reader to apply actual-world understanding to the storyworld, while the extraordinary phenomenon cannot be accommodated by that understanding. A sort of tension results between the consciousnesses, and, unable both to naturalize the extraordinary phenomenon and to retreat to secondary belief, the reader is forced to make meaning out of a violation of reality. I survey a number of possible interpretive maneuvers only to conclude that each of them ultimately neglects the narrative's undeniable feature: its hybridity. The solution, I argue, is to foreground the experience over the argument: in a hybrid-world narrative such as "Benjamin Button," we experience a collision of ordinary parameters and extraordinary phenomena, a collision that destabilizes our most basic assumptions and in turn forces us to (consciously or unconsciously) reexamine those assumptions in relation to the actual world. By building a hybrid world Fitzgerald makes us see freshly and even reevaluate our preconceptions about youth, age, and the actual-world processes that link the former to the latter. To boot, experiencing these uncomfortable confrontations with our foundational precepts, as it perhaps yields a refined perspective, simultaneously trains us for undergoing such challenges in the actual world. Thus we're dealing, I think, with a pertinent form indeed.

i. Ordinary World / Extraordinary Phenomenon

Like Smith in *White Teeth*, Fitzgerald uses the opening of “Benjamin Button” to introduce us to a realist storyworld.¹⁶

As long ago as 1860 it was the proper thing to be born at home. At present, so I am told, the high gods of medicine have decreed that the first cries of the young shall be uttered upon the anesthetic air of a hospital, preferably a fashionable one. So young Mr. and Mrs. Roger Button were fifty years ahead of style when they decided, one day in the summer of 1860, that their first baby should be born in a hospital. (159)

In ordinary circumstances we might consider “1860” only minimally realist in effect, but emerging as we are from Rushdie’s secondary world even this casually imprecise and distant (“As long ago as”) temporal marker feels like a surge of familiarity. Assuming the narrator speaks from sometime around 1922, the year of this story’s publication, his historical assessment of birth practice is an accurate one. Thus the Buttons’ choosing to have their child in a hospital in 1860 constitutes an “anachronism,” which confirms the applicability of our cultural (birthing) norm to the storyworld even as the characters violate it. To close the first paragraph the narrator suggests that this violation is perhaps essential to the forthcoming tale: “Whether this anachronism had any bearing upon the astonishing history I am about to set down will never be known.” I doubt it did, and the remark might even strike us as borderline silly; nonetheless, if it’s *possible* that the Buttons’ anachronistic birthing facilitates the “astonishing” phenomenon that comprises “Benjamin Button,” then the actual-world norms that serve as the anachronism’s backdrop *must* be fixed in the storyworld. So the worlds overlap cultural-historically. It’s worth noting that the narrator refers to the story here as a “history,” the same rhetorical move Cervantes

¹⁶ A great many Fitzgerald stories begin with a grounding in the real. *Tender Is the Night*: “On the pleasant shore of the French Riviera, about halfway between Marseilles and the Italian border, stands a large, proud, rose-colored hotel.” “Head and Shoulders”: “In 1915 Horace Tarbox was thirteen years old. In that year he took the examinations for entrance to Princeton University and received the Grade A—excellent—in Caesar, Cicero, Vergil, Xenophon, Homer, Algebra, Plane Geometry, Solid Geometry, and Chemistry.” The list could go on. If nothing else this recurring strategy shows that Fitzgerald is as aware of the first-impression, world-building importance of beginnings as we theorists are.

pulled three centuries earlier in order to foreground *Don Quixote*'s thematic concern with blurry boundary between fiction and reality. Fitzgerald's expository realism here is less obvious than Smith's in *White Teeth*; we have to dig into the implications in places to elucidate the overlap. But the outcome is akin: our first impression is of a realistic storyworld, indeed a primary world, and our authorial consciousness finds validation in this recognition.

True referentiality does make more overt realism elsewhere in "Benjamin Button," both in the straightforward forms that Smith employs and in slightly altered ones. Since I've already unpacked and sorted the details of referentiality in chapter two, I will examine only a few instances of the technique here. A particularly rich passage of referentiality comes immediately following the opening paragraph in what is still expository material.

The Roger Buttons held an enviable position, both social and financial, in antebellum Baltimore. They were related to the This Family and the That Family, which, as every Southerner knew, entitled them to membership in that enormous peerage which largely populated the Confederacy . . . [Mr. Button] hoped [the child] would be a boy so that he could be sent to Yale College in Connecticut, at which institution Mr. Button himself had been known for years by the somewhat obvious nickname of "Cuff." (160)

"Antebellum" and "Confederacy" evoke not only an actual-world *time*, which "1860" does just fine, but more importantly the cultural milieu associated therewith, and as a result we see the Buttons embedded in a genteel Baltimore that runs on the same values as did its referent in the actual world. The more excusable of those values are evident in the Buttons' perhaps superficial preoccupation with familial connection, acquaintance, or "peerage"; "Southerner," capitalized, evokes a *type* into which these values and others can be squeezed. Types, whether stereo-, arche-, or otherwise, are preformed, prepackaged sets of characteristics used as shorthand to denote a certain sort of person or thing. Hence, referential types show that the characters function using the same cognitive frameworks as we do—the worlds' consequent overlap is cultural,

intellectual, and something deeper, more automatic or intuitive. Yale, like Princeton, is a favorite referent of Fitzgerald's—Eddie goes to Yale in “A Short Trip Home,” another hybrid-world narrative—and here it establishes both the history of one character and the anticipated future of another. That Roger attended the actual-world college and earned a nickname there indicates extensive interaction with the place and its people, which thereby solidifies the referent's empirical existence in the storyworld. And in case we might suspect this Yale of being a fictional analogue to our own, Fitzgerald tacks on the adjectival “in Connecticut” to assure us it isn't.

In the last chapter I discussed the inversion of referentiality that Rushdie uses to signal otherness; Fitzgerald likewise skews or manipulates some references, but the end toward which his maneuver works in “Benjamin Button” is, rather than estrangement, a mildly diminished realism. Take, for starters, the impressive mundaneness of the story's fictional establishments. For a living Roger runs “Roger Button & Co., Wholesale Hardware,” doubtless the most generic formulation Fitzgerald could manage, and can we conjure a more commonplace occupation? Sustenance from the nuts and bolts of the developed world, perhaps even humble enough that it clashes with Roger's Yale education (has Fitzgerald left a seam un-smoothed?). Similarly, the aforementioned birth takes place at “Maryland Private Hospital for Ladies and Gentlemen.” Research shows nothing of the name in the actual world, but I'm less than confident in those findings: it seems almost inevitable that a “Maryland Private Hospital” has operated at some point, and that they admitted as patients both ladies and gentlemen. The hospital and the hardware store are, in other words, *very plausible fictions*, a combination Fitzgerald pulls off by exploiting nomenclatural templates tried for truth by the actual world. A more playful version of this strategy is what we might call *synonymous referentiality*, the replacement of a referential

term with something that fictionalizes the reference but simultaneously invokes the actual-world referent with synonymy or similarity. For example, in “Benjamin Button” the characters read the “*Baltimore Blaze*”; Fitzgerald arrives at this fictional newspaper through a very slight alteration to the actual-world *Baltimore Sun*, and the path isn’t foggy or veiled: the sun blazes, or the fire in a blaze is fully realized on the sun, or however we choose to articulate the obvious connection. With no differentiating information, one aware of the *Sun* cannot *not* recall it when reading of the *Blaze*. That is, our authorial consciousness senses synonymous referentiality as realist despite the minor divergence from the actual world. This realism is, of course, less forceful than forthright referentiality; indeed, Fitzgerald could’ve simply used the *Sun* to signal a greater overlap between the worlds, and it’s not immediately clear why he would instead choose the next-best-thing. Perhaps he feared sending readers to the annals to check the documented validity of his “astonishing history”? In any case, that he stays so near reality even as he departs from it suggests the extent to which Fitzgerald’s aims are realist and therefore the extent to which the storyworld of “Benjamin Button” is *primary*.

The designation of Fitzgerald’s world as primary includes the major effects delineated in my discussion of *White Teeth*: we recognize a multifaceted likeness between the storyworld and the actual world, which aligns the beliefs of the narrative and authorial consciousnesses; in turn, we apply our authorial consciousness’s understanding of the actual world to every element of the narrative.

Then Benjamin is born a snivelly, jaded septuagenarian, and the story is launched.

“Well,” gasped Mr. Button, “which is mine?”

“There!” said the nurse.

Mr. Button’s eyes followed her pointing finger, and this is what he saw. Wrapped in a voluminous white blanket, and partially crammed into one of the cribs, there sat an old man apparently about seventy years of age. His sparse hair was almost white,

and from his chin dripped a long smoke-colored beard, which waved absurdly back and forth . . . (162)

We sense that the narrator is aware of the extraordinariness here. “This is what he saw” followed by a full stop forces a pause to gather, as if preparing us for the sight to come. Perhaps, per the principle of minimal departure, we hesitate to take the figure at face value. Is it merely a hideous baby? Did a disoriented elderly man wander into the infant wing? Alternatively, we might wonder along with Roger, “Am I mad? . . . Is this some kind of ghastly hospital joke?” But the answer is *no* across the board. When Benjamin speaks he foils the naturalizing hypotheses.

“Are you my father?” he demanded . . .

“Because if you are,” went on the old man querulously, “I wish you’d get me out of this place—or, at least, get them to put a comfortable rocker in here.”

“Where in God’s name did you come from? Who are you?” burst out Mr. Button frantically.

“I can’t tell you *exactly* who I am,” replied the querulous whine, “because I’ve only been born a few hours—but my last name is certainly Button.” (163)

The perfect English renders the ugly-infant hypothesis impossible, and the “querulous” or “fault-finding” (OED 1a) self-awareness, in addition to being hilarious, makes implausible Benjamin’s being a confused old man. What we have, then, is “a *baby* of threescore and ten,” an impossible formulation that’s true despite its paradox. If we need third-party support, we get it; Roger calls Benjamin an “impostor,” the latter begs the nurse to vouch, and she does: “You’re wrong, Mr. Button . . . This is your child.” So there it is: an inversion of what is perhaps our safest assumption—to be sure, a degree-one extraordinary phenomenon, and, most importantly, one that transpires in an otherwise primary-world context.

This arrangement, a realist storyworld that includes one or few extraordinary phenomena, is the definition of the hybrid world. The immediate product of the hybrid-world form is a kind of tension that, at least initially, infiltrates our cognitive experience of the narrative. As we’ve seen, the apparent primary world constructed through realist techniques such

as deep referentiality bolsters the beliefs of our authorial consciousness, but then the narrative accosts us with an extraordinary phenomenon that violates the actual-world, authorial-consciousness parameters we've been encouraged to apply. In other words, we're validated by the storyworld in our expectation of minimal departure, but, concurrently, those expectations are radically *unmet* by (in this case) the narrative's governing instability. In primary worlds the beliefs of the narrative and authorial consciousnesses are so alike that the authorial consciousness applies its understanding directly to the storyworld; in secondary worlds the beliefs of the narrative and authorial consciousnesses are so different that the authorial consciousness does not apply its understanding to the storyworld until it performs a macro interpretation of the narrative as designed. Somewhere between, in hybrid worlds the beliefs of the narrative and authorial consciousnesses are alike *except* for the narrative consciousness's observation of the single or few extraordinary phenomena; thus, we're urged to apply frames of understanding or interpretation to something that refuses to fit within them. Fitzgerald's narrator is in-tune when he calls his story an "astonishing history": *history* insists upon applicability in an actual-world context, while *astonishing* denotes "shock" or "wonder by the presentation of something *unaccountable*" (OED 4, my emphasis). I have more to say about the affordance of this conflict below.

But the first question we should answer about the hybrid world runs parallel to the concept of secondary belief. Matthew Bruccoli, sultan of Fitzgerald scholarship, writes in a headnote to "Benjamin Button," "The challenge of fantasy is to make impossible events convincing" (159). Secondary worlds meet this challenge with an extreme otherness that incites belief on the premise that the storyworld is governed by different, perhaps inscrutable laws. I

would quarrel with calling hybrid worlds “fantasy,” but Bruccoli’s challenge applies to them nonetheless, and the consequent question is vital: in a world so like ours, why should we believe in such an extraordinary phenomenon?

ii. The X / Y Format & The Rhetoric of Veracity

Because hybrid worlds involve intrusive, anomalous, or otherwise deviant contraventions of reality, it stands to reason that they would share some rhetorical principles with purported *nonfictional* accounts of the extraordinary. Thus the work of scholars outside literary studies could provide insight that enhances our understanding of hybrid-world purposes and effects. A short list of such texts includes folklorist Gillian Bennett’s *Alas, Poor Ghost!*, psychologist Jonathan Potter’s *Representing Reality*, and sociologist Robin Wooffitt’s *Telling Tales of the Unexpected*; this latter study benefits us immediately here. Wooffitt analyzes paranormal reports (written and oral) in an effort to locate and unpack a variety of the strategies that tellers’ use to establish veracity. This veracity relies on the teller being “normal” (or sane) and the reported phenomena being “factual” (or existent in the world); the rhetorical maneuvers that Wooffitt delineates are therefore attempts at convincing a “recipient” of the normality and the factuality of the teller and the told. The way of doing so that’s relevant for us is what Wooffitt calls the *X/Y Format*, or the “‘I was just doing X . . . when Y’” formulation, where X is some “mundane” or ordinary thing and Y is the supernatural event. For example, I was just (X) folding the laundry when I (Y) saw the ghostly figure pass through the hall. According to Wooffitt, the “X” part of the format is a “state formulation,” a construction of a context that houses the focal Y, and speakers “design” the X as mundane in order to root their “unreal” story in the real (117-130). That is, the speaker constructs an everyday context to verify and emphasize the reality of the tale.

The paranormal Y, then, comes in discursive continuity with the constructed reality, and it seems normal and factual and thus believable on account of the insistent ordinariness of the prefatory X.

It's this contrast that ultimately provides the rhetorical potency of the X/Y format.

Wooffitt subsumes the X/Y into a larger category of "contrast pairs" that speakers employ as "persuasive devices" in stories both natural and supernatural (143). The implication is that such devices are as effective as the severity of their contrasts.

The juxtaposition of these images furnishes the basis for inferential work by which the character of each component is affirmed in relation to the other. Thus the everyday character of the state formulation is inferentially available by virtue of the contrast to what happened next, while the strangeness of the phenomenon is made inferentially available through its juxtaposition to the everyday and routine. (143)

Prince Hal illustrates the notion less turgidly in *I Henry IV*: "My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault, / shall show more goodly and attract more eyes / than that which hath no foil to set it off" (I.ii). Hal's contention is that honor and valor seem truest and most intense when juxtaposed with Eastcheap debauchery, and vice versa. Wooffitt offers a kindred claim about X and Y: the ordinary context is the "foil" that "sets off" the extraordinary event, while the extraordinary event does likewise to the context. We should underscore that latter half—not only does the X affirm and intensify the extraordinariness of the Y, but the extraordinary Y, "*by virtue of the contrast*," affirms and intensifies the ordinariness of the X (my emphasis). In other words, each depends on the other for its fullest existence in the story; as Wooffitt puts it, the X/Y format "implicates the *contingency* of one event upon another" (138). The tight juxtaposition makes inseparable the supernatural event and the domain of normality and factuality, and as a result the extraordinary phenomenon is rendered believable *and* extraordinary.

It might well be clear by now where I'm heading. I want to suggest that it's the sharpness of the contrast between realist world and extraordinary phenomenon that incites belief in a hybrid world—and it does so in much the same way as Wooffitt outlines. Quite literally *everything* about the storyworld of “Benjamin Button” is realist apart from Benjamin himself. I've surveyed here only the opening scenes and still discovered cultural, temporal, topographical, institutional, and historical overlap between the worlds. Yes, only the *opening*: X first, *then* Y; the sole extraordinary phenomenon transpires *among* the extreme realism, which “implicates contingency” of each upon the other, and we believe “by virtue of the contrast” in Benjamin as an exceptional transgression of the actual-world laws we've assumed to be applicable to the storyworld. In other words, rather than an ordinary phenomenon in an ordinary world (as in the primary) or an extraordinary phenomenon in an extraordinary world (as in the secondary), Benjamin's reverse aging is an extraordinary phenomenon *in spite of* the ordinary world. Moreover, that extraordinary phenomenon is the narrative's global instability, which is to say that it *itself* mobilizes the story. Thus insofar as its juxtaposition with the realist storyworld enacts, as Wooffitt argues, a mutual dependence between ordinary and extraordinary, we might say that the narrative progression *guarantees* the world's realism, which in turn guarantees the narrative progression. Indeed, we would have no tale if Benjamin was born an ordinary, wailing infant and quite a different tale if all “babies” were born leathery and articulate and advanced thence to infancy. “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” is, then, a sort of scaled-up, story-size X/Y formulation, with all that entails in the way of belief and cognition.

I will return to the idea of a story-size X/Y shortly, but I want to linger longer over belief to show how Fitzgerald maintains the tightness and thereby the effectiveness of his contrast pair.

After the narrator closes the opening expository paragraph by calling the coming story an “astonishing history,” he says, “I shall tell you what occurred, and let you judge for yourself.” Yet letting us decide for ourselves does not stop Fitzgerald from employing various local rhetorical tools to influence our decision. Two such tools we can find explicated in Gillian Bennett’s *Alas, Poor Ghost!*, a study that frequently overlaps with Wooffitt’s while considering folkloric and other (quasi-)literary sources that elude Wooffitt’s social-scientific orientation. Bennett likens supernatural storytelling to an exchange with a judge and a jury, whereby the audience needs to be convinced, as Wooffitt contends, of the report’s factuality. Implicit recognition of this situation leads tellers to appeal to an *imaginary* judge and jury without external prompt or question, embedding responses to potential objections within the design of their discourse. Anticipatory argument of this sort Bennett calls the “Accusing I”: a teller foresees, for example, an accusation of drunken delusion and so preempts that objection by saying, “We’d not had a lot to drink” (128). Literary storytellers can’t be so forthright, but we can often detect the Accusing I in moments of character interaction and focalized narration. Some of the interpretations I’ve already given of the story’s first episodes (which are lightly focalized through Roger) appeal to an imaginary judge and jury. Following Benjamin’s birth the narrator insists “There was no mistake,” as if to preempt any number of objections based on “joke,” misperception, or incorrect location; Roger’s immediately asking the nurses “Am I mad?” appeals to *that* hypothesis with an awareness that simultaneously belies it (see: *Catch-22*). Similarly, Benjamin’s initial articulate, humorous, and situationally-aware speech overrides the two possible naturalizations, namely that he is either an extraordinarily defective [ed] infant or an extraordinarily disoriented old man—Fitzgerald knows of these routes out and precludes

them. A little later, twelve years on in story-time, Benjamin makes an “astonishing discovery” (that adjective again): “Did his eyes deceive him, or had his hair turned in the dozen years of his life from white to iron-grey under its concealing dye?” (167). The dye itself is important insofar as it emphasizes the need to *artificially* assimilate, but the main point here is that first interrogative clause, “Did his eyes deceive him,” which shows through focalization Benjamin’s battle with an Accusing I objecting to the “astonishing” observation. Benjamin really wonders thus, and our narrative consciousness takes note and maybe joins him in his wonder, but for our authorial consciousness the question is again Fitzgerald’s acknowledgement of naturalizing possibilities; and because by this point in the progression Benjamin’s condition is clear, this acknowledgement works simultaneously as a negation. The list of these moments is long and, needless to say, not exhausted by this paragraph.

Bennett’s second strategy for dealing with the imaginary judge and jury is what she terms “Calling to Witness,” which is, just like it sounds, “the reframing of the argument by the reporting of another person’s experiences.” Tellers can call to witness not only in overt “She was there, ask her!” sorts of formulations but also with subtler maneuvers such as first-person-plural noun phrases and “side stories” that, by implying contingency, involve a third party in the main tale. Rhetorically, the purpose of that involvement is to “double” the “number of voices arrayed to speak in defense of the [teller’s] case” and thus to double the veracity of the claim (128-130). Calls to witness in fiction likewise take various forms—characters to character, character to audience, narrator to audience, author to reader; here I want to consider Fitzgerald’s rhetorical call to witness through his characters’ reactions to Benjamin. Prior to the astonished fit that I’ve already discussed, Roger encounters the doctor who delivered Benjamin. “Oh, Doctor Keene!”

Roger cries excitedly, to which the doctor responds with a silent “curious expression” on a “harsh, medicinal face.” After some unproductively evasive back-and-forth, the doctor has a revealing outburst.

“Is it a boy or a girl?” [Roger asked].
 “Here now!” cried Doctor Keene in a perfect passion of irritation. “I’ll ask you to go and see for yourself. Outrageous!” He snapped the last word out in almost one syllable, then he turned away muttering: “Do you imagine a case like this will help my professional reputation? One more would ruin me—ruin anybody.” (160)

Passionate irritation, outrageousness, ruined reputations, an inability to come out with it: the expert’s expertise can’t accommodate Benjamin. That Keene fears a career hit at the hands of this birth indicates how anomalous the phenomenon is and reveals his relatable instinct to naturalize it, as if Benjamin’s extraordinariness were merely from mutilative malpractice. But Keene doesn’t explain the problem to Roger. Nor does the nurse at the hospital’s front desk, who, upon learning Roger’s identity, assumes “a look of utter terror” and a squirrely resolve to rid herself of him: “Oh—of course! . . . Up stairs. Right up-stairs. Go—*up!*” He goes up, tells another nurse his name, and she *too* starts, dropping a basin that sounds “Clank! Clank!” across the floor and the page. Under her breath she reiterates Keene’s conception of the event as “outrageous” and scales up his fear for his reputation to the hospital as a whole. Eventually she assents, leads Roger to Benjamin, and what follows is the first-contact scene I discussed above.

It’s especially useful to consider characters’ early contacts with extraordinary phenomena because they exhibit a thinking mind struck as ours is and in the process of coming to terms. There’s a range of possible reactions that can expose phenomena as anything from one-off, entirely anomalous to quotidian in terms of the storyworld, and such exposure can in turn indicate something about the makeup of the storyworld as a whole. Naturally, the more instances of the same reaction we can identify, the more confidently we can depend on that reaction’s

implications. Fitzgerald makes this process pretty innocuous: every character upon first encountering Benjamin reacts in shock or confusion or disgust or some other signal of severe abnormality. The home-nurse, arranged by the Buttons ahead of time, “[leaves] the house after one look” at Benjamin. Around Baltimore the man/child creates “a sensation,” but, hilariously, some of the Buttons’ “unfailingly polite” acquaintances show concern for social etiquette rather than ontological crisis: searching for the obligatory “*how cute!*” but unable (given the aesthetic circumstance) to use that mold, they “hit upon the ingenious device of declaring that the baby resembled his grandfather,” which “could not be denied” (164-166). While it’s true that to spend time sorting out the etiquette is in a sense to downplay the much bigger complication of the backwards birth, Fitzgerald’s attribution of these social concerns to the Baltimore townspeople actually works well with the values he’s already ascribed to them. Instead of surrendering their beliefs and conceding to uproar, the characters maintain their preexisting modes of being and respond to Benjamin *just as they might*, in their own unique mode of acknowledging the extraordinary. Savvily, Fitzgerald uses this arrangement to reinforce both the extraordinariness of Benjamin (he looks like his grandfather) *and* the realism of the townspeople’s referential upperclass, antebellum behavior (they cared to formulate that “compliment”). To enhance the comedy of the scenario, Benjamin’s grandfather is “furiously insulted” by the “ingenious device,” for he, too, is disgusted by the child. Roger and Mrs. Button remain “somewhat in awe” of Benjamin and even “frequently address him as ‘Mr.’”; it’s unclear whether such addresses are slip-ups or purposeful, but in any case they lay bare the complication that Benjamin provides to his parents’ understanding. Or, for that matter, to his own: “[Benjamin] was as puzzled as any one else at the apparently advanced age of his mind and body,” Fitzgerald writes, so “He read up

on it in the medical journal but found that no such case had been previously recorded” (167).

This research confirms the utmost deviance of the phenomenon. So, not only do the referenced characters react in shock, disgust, or confusion, but presumably *everyone* would, and rightly — “no such case” in the storyworld’s history acts as primer.

The proliferation of these reactions complicates Kim Sasser’s classification of “Benjamin Button” as “magical realism,” a tempting reading indeed but ultimately one that the persistent extraordinariness of Benjamin discourages us from performing. “Magical realism” refers to the (predominantly) Latin-American phenomenon, beginning in the 1940s and blooming throughout the postmodernist period,¹⁷ of assimilating miracles and impossibilities into seemingly realistic settings. There are variations on the theme, but, as practiced by such founding figures as Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar, and Gabriel García Márquez, magic realism is generally characterized by what Brian McHale calls a “banalization of the fantastic,” or the treatment of extraordinary phenomena as if they were totally, even exceedingly ordinary. And this effect is usually achieved at least in part by the “characters’ failure to be amazed by paranormal happenings” (*PF* 76-77). Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is a later example of magic realism; in it miracles of telepathy and other impossibilities occur so frequently that they “appear,” in McHale’s words, “routine.” Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is often considered the seminal magic-realist novel; its world not only normalizes impossibilities but, as McHale argues, its characters’ reactions are “*inverted*”—ascension to heaven is considered prosaic, whereas ice is a wild miracle. “Benjamin Button” obviously never reaches an inverted reality wherein *all* humans are born septuagenarians and only the anomalies are born infants. Nor, however, does it reach a “banalization of the

¹⁷ Sasser is aware of the quasi-anachronistic nature of her classification; she calls her magical-realist reading “retrospective,” meaning that “Benjamin Button” exhibits the tenets of magical realism despite appearing decades before both the term’s coinage and the solidification of any definite list of characteristics.

fantastic” at all: Benjamin remains an isolated incident, and, in direct contrast to magic-realist conventions, the characters respond to the extraordinary phenomenon *like it is indeed extraordinary*. This is, of course, quite difficult to miss, and Sasser displays knowledge of the character responses that I delineate above. But she apparently does not consider them departures from magic realism; rather, she spins them into buttresses for her case. Sasser zeroes in on such reactions as Keene’s anxiety about disrepute and the house-nurse’s “indignation” to argue that the characters feel “not fear” or “dismay,” which would be the appropriate responses, “but scorn” and “insult,” sentiments that grant Benjamin an *assumed* empirical validity that, for his “aberrance,” he doesn’t deserve. The ultimate point is seemingly that “Benjamin and most of the characters accept his existence . . . all too readily” to *not* banalize the extraordinary phenomenon (184-186). I grant that some characters’ reactions are ethically or logically confused, but nonetheless in *every* case they signal abnormality. Moreover, there *is* in fact a degree of hesitation implicit in reactions such as Keene’s, which display an instinct to naturalize Benjamin into defection or mutilation, and likewise for the nurse’s indignation: there’s something *wrong* about Benjamin, and some characters, reluctant as people are to entertain supernatural possibilities, respond to that wrongness how they’d respond to other worldly wrongnesses. It does no good to point out that characters accept Benjamin’s existence. Charles Simic usefully aphorizes, “People rarely doubt that they see,” and, indeed, how could Keene or Roger or the nurses sanely deny Benjamin’s actuality when he stands, five-foot-eight and bearded, before their eyes? *Of course* they accept his existence. The readiness to which Sasser refers should pertain to the characters’ acceptance of Benjamin’s true *extraordinariness*, and for *this* we have a range of results—Roger’s “Am I mad? . . . Is this some kind of ghastly hospital joke?” contrasted with the

nurses' resignation to the circumstance, and so forth. But even in the most forthright suggestion of normality

By the time he was twelve years old his parents had grown used to him. Indeed, so strong is the force of custom that they no longer felt he was different from any other child—except when some curious anomaly reminded them of the fact. (167)

the point is ultimately the Buttons' impressive ability to accept then *overlook* Benjamin's extraordinariness and "raise" him anyway, rather than the dissolution of that extraordinariness. What's more, Fitzgerald links this ability to the *actual* world. Notice the brief shift out of the narrative-past tense to the present tense in "so strong *is* the force of custom"; this statement tethers the Buttons' getting-accustomed, which Sasser would argue banalizes, to the actual-world human capacity to adapt and/or ignore, given time. The curious anomalies then serve as reminders of the extraordinary that drop the parents out of their adaptation. It boils down to this: as the medical journals show, Benjamin's total aberrance is a fact of the storyworld, but then *so is Benjamin*. The characters (and we) respond to *both* of these matters, and while eventual acceptance is inevitable, the extraordinary remains exactly that; or, closer to Wooffitt's terms, Y never fades into X. So a magic-realist reading of the story can't check off magic realism's vital tenet.

What's important here, however, is not just that calling "Benjamin Button" magic realism is not apt but also that the character reactions serve a greater world-building purpose—namely, to maintain the tightness of the X/Y juxtaposition. The rhetorical strategy, Wooffitt says, works by virtue of the contrast. We can infer, then, that any space inserted *between* X and Y, between ordinary and extraordinary, would loosen the contrast and diminish the veracity and therefore the poignancy of the tale. It's perhaps useful to return to the law for illustration. In order for her

testimony to be taken as trustworthy and valuable, a witness needs her perception (her senses and her ability to process sensory stimuli) to be considered functional, unimpeded, and certain—or, the world she reports perceiving must unquestionably have been the actual world in its “objective” (true and normal) form. Hence, interrogations such as “You wear prescription eyeglasses; were you wearing them that night?” and “You’d just been woken up; are you sure you weren’t delirious?” are attempts to *separate* perception from reality, to forge a wrench to drive between X and Y. Similarly, consider what would happen to my first X/Y example, “I was just folding the laundry when I saw the ghostly figure pass through the hall,” if its speaker had said instead, “I was just folding the laundry when I decided to take the psilocybin and then I saw the ghostly figure pass through the hall.” The hallucinogen is an extra step, an X-and-a-half that is now the immediate potential cause of perception Y; or, at the least, it taints the contingency of Y upon X by admitting an additional element into the sequence. Drugs, drowsiness, and bad eyesight are extreme and obvious examples, but any material at all between X and Y would have the same effect (to varying degrees) of driving the extraordinary perception away from its root in reality and thus damaging the veracity of the report. In our world-building terms, such intermediary material would include any indication that the storyworld is unlike the actual world in any way beyond its one or few extraordinary phenomena. If additional extraordinary phenomena transpire, if a part of the storyworld is unrecognizable, if *characters suggest that what’s happening is normal*, then the narrative (at least partially) loses the sense that the extraordinary phenomena are occurring in a fictive version of the actual world. In other words, the farther Y is driven from X, the closer the storyworld is to secondary. Fitzgerald’s consistent

representation of character outrage, shock, confusion, and disgust serves the purpose of keeping as tight as possible the juxtaposition of realist world and extraordinary phenomenon.

iii. The X/Y Format and/as Narrative Progression

It would be easier to concede to Sasser's contention if so much of the narrative progression weren't made up of characters' attempts to *restore* normality to the situation, reactions-turned-actions that, by failing to work, simply magnify Benjamin's resilient abnormality and the difficulty of dealing therewith. Roger attempts a sequence of normality restorations in the beginning of Benjamin's life, a sequence for which we're given his motivation outright: "Mr. Button persisted in his unwavering purpose. Benjamin was a baby, and a baby he should remain." To achieve this purpose Roger initially refuses the "repugnant notion" of dressing his son in the men's clothes for which Benjamin is built. But babies' clothes obviously won't do, so Roger searches for "a *very* large boy's suit," and what he finds is a comical getup "for fancy dress" that includes "dotted socks, pink pants, and a belted blouse with a wide white collar." Needless to say, "The effect [is] not good," and, naturally, the fix is to "amputate" Benjamin's long white beard (164-165). These attempts become only more farcical when they extend beyond the aesthetic.

At first [Roger] declared that if Benjamin didn't like warm milk he could go without food altogether, but he was finally prevailed upon to allow his son bread and butter, and even oatmeal by way of compromise. One day he brought home a rattle and, giving it to Benjamin, insisted in no uncertain terms that he should "play with it" . . . (166)

Compromise here previews Roger's path toward acceptance and also reveals Benjamin's willingness to stand his ground or, in other words, assert his abnormality. Nevertheless, the agreement only grants Benjamin what sound like cliché prison rations, an absolute-minimum diminishment of the declaration's absurdity. Interestingly, Roger's initial rule is not only that

Benjamin must *drink* the warm milk but that he must *like* it. With this subtle difference Fitzgerald reveals the depth of Roger's desired control: *acting* like a baby is too shallow; Benjamin must literally have the taste of an actual newborn, lest he starve. Roger wants to *reinstate a reality* that does not contain an infant-septuagenarian, a realist world without the extraordinary phenomenon, an X without a disruptive Y, a regular old primary world. The meagre terms of the compromise thus reveal the minutiae of Roger's concession to the extraordinary. Beyond diet, with the rattle and command to play with it Roger uses his parental power to force childish and therefore normal behavior to manifest, and in a way it works; Benjamin, wanting to please his father, "obediently" jingles the rattle "at intervals throughout the day." But it bores him nonetheless as it would indeed, and on the sneakier frequencies Benjamin gives in to his own desires, smoking Roger's Cuban cigars with regularity and often "steal[ing] down the back stairs" to fetch an *Encyclopedia Britannica* "over which he would pore over an afternoon." Such info-packed afternoons necessitate a disregard of the baby toys Roger had purchased (lead soldiers, toy trains, and "large pleasant animals made of cotton" on top of the rattle) in an effort "to perfect the illusion which he was creating." For the same purpose, the narrator tells us, Roger had "passionately demanded of the clerk in the toy-store whether 'the paint would come off the pink duck if the baby put it in his mouth'" (164, 166-167). There is *no reason* for this demand: Benjamin isn't present, the clerk doesn't know of him, and Roger knows Benjamin won't be putting the painted duck in his mouth. Only for his own sake could Roger pose such a question, for the reinforcement of that "illusion" of normality. Again this response might border on absurd, but still it works toward the established end; that is, Fitzgerald plants the absurdity to emphasize or insist upon Benjamin's utter extraordinariness in the contexts of both

the storyworld and the actual world. (In turn, the accordance of the worlds grows tighter.) I have not exhausted Roger's attempts to correct Benjamin's aberrance. With their humor, the hyperbolic realism of their outrage, and the pathos of this strained relationship, these scenes of Roger's struggle with his son comprise in effect—if not in word count—a significant portion of the narrative's force. In other words, much of the progression's design is contingent upon Roger's initial refusal to banalize, to accept and let flourish, his son's transgressive gerontology.

As I've suggested, Roger does eventually accept and (for a time) raise Benjamin in something close to proper manner, but what hole that resolution patches is re-poked by Benjamin's unstable efforts to lead a normal life in spite of his abnormality. At eighteen, which means something like fifty in physiology and -ogonomy, Benjamin attempts to enroll at Yale, a fulfillment of Roger's dream. In an implicit admission of his strangeness, Benjamin thinks when he arrives in New Haven to freshen the brown hair-dye that masks his natural salt-and-pepper, but his dye bottle he'd emptied and disposed of a day previous. Due at the college registrar in five minutes, Benjamin is forced "to go as he [is]" (as if, we think, brown dye would've closed the thirty-year aesthetic gap enough for passing), and the ensuing exchange frustrates his hope for normality.

"Good morning," said the registrar politely. "You've come to inquire about your son."

"Why, as a matter of fact, my name's Button—" began Benjamin, but Mr. Hart cut him off.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Button. I'm expecting your son here any minute."

"That's me!" burst out Benjamin. "I'm a freshman."

"What!"

"I'm a freshman."

"Surely you're joking."

"Not at all."

The registrar frowned and glanced at the card before him. "Why, I have Mr. Benjamin Button's age down here as eighteen."

"That's my age," asserted Benjamin, flushing slightly.

The registrar eyed him wearily. "Now surely, Mr. Button, you don't expect me to believe that."

Benjamin smiled wearily. "I am eighteen," he repeated.

The registrar pointed sternly to the door. "Get out," he said. "Get out of college and get out of town. You are a dangerous lunatic." (169)

I quote at such length because the registrar so fully exemplifies a "sane" processual reaction to the extraordinary phenomenon. Inferring that this apparent fifty-year-old is a student's father is wholly reasonable to begin; like Roger, when Hart is first informed of the situation he assumes it's a joke—a level, even charitable attempt at rationalization; then, as Benjamin becomes not only a freshman but a freshman *of eighteen* Hart jumps to madness because rational, *correct* understandings of reality can't accommodate the purported circumstance. Ordering Benjamin out of his sight is Hart's way of steadying his disrupted preconceptions; ordering Benjamin out of not only Yale but college in general is Hart's way of maintaining the collegiate system's demographic order that Benjamin threatens; and ordering Benjamin "out of town" (that classic maxim) is Hart's way of "protecting" his world from the "danger" that such cognitive and societal subversions tend to pose. Fitzgerald's commentary here is multileveled and various, running from a satirization of elite administrative types to a critique of human preoccupation with appearance to a global discussion of how we deal with difference, and that plurality is a testament to his subtlety and skill. But I want to highlight the world-building implications of this density's presentation. Benjamin is trying to attain normality by going to university, but Hart, frontline representative of Yale *and thereby the gatekeeper of normality*, emphatically turns Benjamin away. This situation supports the hybrid world in four ways simultaneously: [1] Benjamin's goal affirms that, like in the actual world, it's custom to attend college at eighteen; [2] that Benjamin goes for his goal despite knowing he's abnormal suggests that there is no alternative track carved out in the storyworld for backwards people like him; [3] that he's turned away confirms our conviction that Benjamin, though having been born eighteen years prior, is

not an ordinary college-age kid; and [4] Hart's behavior indicates that Benjamin's extraordinariness is an *outrage*, an anomalous freak-phenomenon that he (a storyworld resident) has never before seen. One and two help to build the realist context, while three and four sharpen the extraordinariness of the extraordinary phenomenon. Taken together, then, these four elements act as push-pull, an interaction between the X and the Y in which each, rather than yield ground to the other, reaffirms and insists upon the qualities of itself.

In keeping with the logic of the arrangement, Benjamin's reverse aging does provide a window of advantage—between the prime years of 20 (50) and 50 (20)—during which he achieves quite a distinguished and pleasurable normality; but while this period *seems* to Benjamin to counter the misfortune of the bookends, the inescapability of his extraordinariness makes us unable to see his midlife success as anything more than a doomed, quasi-dishonest enterprise, even as we feel some sympathetic satisfaction at his temporary happiness. Benjamin's accomplishments, piled on hyperbolically, include being the first man in Baltimore to own and run an automobile, devising a “famous business coup” that subsequently became a federal statute and saved the family hardware business loads of money, financing a twenty-volume “History of the Civil War,” providing medaled service in the Spanish-American War, dominating for the Harvard football team, and for a short time becoming “the most celebrated man in college.” Some of these accomplishments, however, are forthrightly the consequences of an advantage bestowed upon Benjamin by his condition. At Harvard, for instance, he's fifty but “apparently about twenty,” and it's his worldly experience and his two-year bodily advantage over other freshmen that facilitate his social and athletic success—for corroboration consider that in his

third and fourth years, the physical asymmetry reversed, Benjamin's dominance turns to failure to make the football roster at all.

Perhaps the fullest representation of this advantage's nature is Benjamin's romantic relationship. Around twenty years after his birth Benjamin becomes roughly his father's "peer," and, the pair attends together various fashionable parties around Baltimore. At one such gathering Benjamin spots a girl, Hildegard Moncrief, and requests that Roger introduce him to her; upon introduction Benjamin asks for a dance, Hildegard assents, and after an envious period of waiting his turn the couple performs the common young-love Fitzgerald scene, but with a twist.

But when his own time came, and he drifted with her out upon the changing floor to the music of the latest waltz from Paris, his jealousies and anxieties melted from him like a mantle of snow. Blind with enchantment, he felt that life was just beginning.

"You and your brother got here just as we did, didn't you?" asked Hildegard, looking up at him with eyes that were like bright blue enamel.

Benjamin hesitated. If she took him for his father's brother, would it be best to enlighten her? He remembered his experience at Yale, so he decided against it. It would be rude to contradict a lady; it would be criminal to mar this exquisite occasion with the grotesque story of his origin. Later, perhaps. So he nodded, smiled, listened, was happy.

"I like men of your age," Hildegard told him . . . (171)

Despite appearing middle-aged, Benjamin is only around twenty, and so he's not wrong to feel that "life [is] just beginning." It's the prototypical sentiment expressed by young people who've just had their first exposure to "society," and, indeed, it's the feeling Fitzgerald has spent much ink paying tribute to with characters (Gatsby, Blaine, Diver, Dexter Green) who seek in vain to recover it. But the devastating irony in Benjamin's statement is obvious—his bright-eyed gaze toward life's unwritten horizon is undermined by his actual position in this societal dynamic, which, based on his physical presentation, places him two-thirds of the way to the finish line. However, it's exactly that position that's appealing to Hildegard; "young boys are so idiotic,"

she says, but men of fifty are just right. So Benjamin benefits here, for the first time, from his extraordinariness: he gets the girl *because* he looks and acts like he's fifty. Yet in the fundamental sense of lived-years he *isn't*, a reality we're reminded of as Hildegarde's remarks make Benjamin "[long] passionately to be fifty," and when he chooses *not* to correct Hildegarde's assumptions he gives way to the driving instability I mentioned above. Benjamin's decorated normality is rattletrap, built on unnatural, sometimes deceitful benefits of his extraordinary condition, and as a result we're constantly aware of that normality's inevitable impermanence.

More specifically, we're constantly aware of this impermanence because it's clear, to us and often to Benjamin, where this thing is going. His life is bell-curved. So much is apparent in miniature form in that progression from star player to excluded-from-roster at Harvard. The reverse is proper; sound the refrain: Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team as a sophomore. But Benjamin, developing opposite Jordan, is rejected *after* stardom. Benjamin and Hildegarde marry, and their ensuing relationship exhibits a similar but more complex progression over a longer period, as the inexplicable stroke of luck that was "fifty-year old" Benjamin scoring belle Hildegarde literally flips, urging the townspeople to gossip, "What a pity! . . . He must be twenty years younger than his wife." Indeed, it's a pity for Benjamin, whose gravest worry by this point is his diminishing sexual and emotional attraction to Hildegarde. Via his successes he acquires the energetic arrogance of a celebrated man, into which focalized narration grants us insight: Hildegarde has become "too placid, too content, too anemic," and the "faint skirmish line of gray hairs in her head . . . depress[es] him." A "chasm" (social, aesthetic, temperamental) thus opens between the couple and widens as they progress toward obverse poles of existence (174-175). Though he here seems in the more fortunate position, at least within

Fitzgerald's usual frame of idealized youth, Benjamin's awareness of his aging's implications never fully wanes, and during especially consequential recognitions his anxiety shows blatantly in the narration. One such recognition intercepts the discussion of his displeasure with Hildegarde.

“Good Lord!” he said aloud. The process was continuing. There was no doubt of it—he looked now like a man of thirty. Instead of being delighted he was uneasy—he was growing younger. He had hitherto hoped that once he reached a bodily age equivalent to his age in years, the grotesque phenomenon which had marked his birth would cease to function. He shuddered. His destiny seemed to him awful, incredible. (174)

Obviously the phenomenon was not going to reverse, but that Benjamin hoped it might simply underlines the awareness he's never shed of the process itself. Unease now overcomes him because the override, the proving-false, of his reversal hope crystallizes the suspected end as imminent and guaranteed.

And what, precisely, is that “awful, incredible” destiny? Need we ask? (If yes, answer: *nothingness*.) After Harvard Benjamin moves in with his son, Roscoe, who, because he's “prominent in Baltimore life” and wants “no scandal” to be associated with him, urges Benjamin first to “wear eye-glasses and imitation whiskers” then (giving up on physical disguise) to call him “Uncle” when guests are around. Benjamin mentions going to “St. Midas,” a fictive preparatory school Fitzgerald uses in multiple stories (see “Diamond as Big as the Ritz”), but needs Roscoe to enroll him, and the latter has no time. Sulking purposelessly with appropriate teenage angst, Benjamin receives a redemptive request from the United States Army for his services as “brigadier-general” in the newly-joined Great War. With a distinguished air carried over from his earlier service, Benjamin travels by train to “Camp Mosby, in South Carolina, where he [is] to command an infantry brigade.” But he's greeted as a child would be, with assumptions that he wants to “play soldier” and that he is the “little boy” of someone at the

camp; the official request letter he presents is of no use, and he's sent home. After a section break the narration picks up three years later, following the birth of Roscoe's son, with whom "ten-year-old" Benjamin plays using "lead soldiers and a miniature circus" (177-178). This scene gives way to Roscoe's concurrent enrollment of his father and his son in kindergarten; a year later his son progresses to first grade, but Benjamin stays put. Benjamin loses his hold on language, is pulled from the school, centers his world on his nurse. In quite earnest and affecting final paragraphs Fitzgerald delineates the fall into infant ignorance and out, ultimately, of the waking world altogether. For its pathos I quote one here.

The past—the wild charge at the head of his men up San Juan Hill; the first years of his marriage when he worked late into the summer dusk down in the busy city for young Hildegard whom he loved; the days before that when he sat smoking far into the night in the gloomy old Button house on Monroe Street with his grandfather—all these had faded like unsubstantial dreams from his mind as though they had never been. (180)

This passage is an example of perhaps Fitzgerald's foremost virtue, that combination of lyrical style and benedictive sentimentality for which he remains so rhetorically powerful, and with great effort do I restrain from devoting any assessment of his stories to those terms.¹⁸ At this end the tone and style intensify what's being told, namely that Benjamin's destiny is a sort of *erasure* of the happy normality he achieved in his middle years. Fitzgerald reminds us of these feats in a warm, nostalgic manner only to tear down their relevance by narrating their disappearance from the mind of the curious man whose life they've been. A number of parallels with Benjamin's early life—university rejection turns to military rejection, companionship with grandfather turns to companionship with grandson—ensure the neatness of the bell curve, with a(n) (d)evolved but equivalent lowliness at either end. The equivalence represents precisely the fate toward which

¹⁸ "And as I sat there brooding on the unknown world . . ." in *Gatsby*; "For the first time in years the tears were streaming . . ." in "Winter Dreams." The long list could go on and on.

Benjamin felt himself heading and that which provided the experiential instability during his success by promising impermanence; *remember you are aberrant and to aberrance you shall return*. But that instability is exacerbated by the *difference* of Benjamin's end from his beginning: an ordinary elderly man who has experienced such decoration would likely bask in its wake or, in less fortunate circumstances, either lament its superficiality or regret its termination; but Benjamin, doomed to oblivious babyhood, can participate in *none* of these legitimizing acknowledgments of his past. In ordinary circumstances (again) one's acquaintances might acknowledge and thereby maintain the legitimacy of one's deeds, but Benjamin's complicated (impossible, really) relationship to peerage renders that solution moot. The normal middle years are therefore devoid of any post to which to tether their empirical validity, so their fading "*as if they had never been*" is in some sense a fading *to never having been*. Hence "erasure" above, rather than simply "forgetting." All along Benjamin's destiny was death by infancy, for all that entails in the way of purity and blankness.

As soon as we recognize this inevitable outcome—that is, once we grasp the story's conceit—the extent to which Benjamin will engage in a losing fight for a "normal" place in the world, *not* the hope for a totally successful normalization, becomes our guiding interest in the narrative. It doesn't take long for us to realize that the realism of the storyworld isn't budging; in other words, this world will not turn out to be *secondary*. But nor, however, is Benjamin to outgrow his extraordinariness and recreate primary-world order—this we know based on his "awful, incredible" destiny. In place of these possibilities step up the duration and particular circumstances of Benjamin's doomed struggle for normality. How long can he keep up the success? How high will his achievements pile before they're scrapped? Will he make and

maintain relationships? Will anyone understand? Will he make it all the way or perish before he reaches infancy? If we're aware of the conceit's end-time implication, it should be these questions and others like them that stimulate our interest in the progression.

The important point here is not merely the direction of our attention but that the tension between micro achievements of normality and ultimately inevitable abnormality represents a greater, governing force of the story's construction. I talked above about Benjamin's rejection from Yale contributing to the architecture of the hybrid world by simultaneously fortifying both the X and the Y, making the ordinary contingent upon the extraordinary and vice versa. This interplay is likewise at work on the grander scale of global instability and resolution. Experientially, "Benjamin Button" is primarily about Benjamin's struggle for a place in a world—not a family, not a society, but an entire world—that renders him perpetually out of place. At the risk of stating the obvious I point out that this design has at least a twofold requirement: a protagonist who is extraordinary in terms of his storyworld and a storyworld that is unyielding in its marking of the protagonist as extraordinary. The latter half of the requirement implies that the storyworld is *ordinary* in relation to its protagonist's extraordinariness, or, put differently, that a realist context houses the extraordinary phenomenon. (While we could imagine a mirror-image conceit that had a realist protagonist fighting for a place in a secondary world, it would make quite a different story.) If the foremost element of "Benjamin Button" is Benjamin's struggle for normality, then it's obvious that the progression here depends upon the hybrid world. But in fact I don't think that statement goes far enough. Because we're aware both of the truth when Benjamin masquerades and of where it all must end, neither realism nor extraordinariness ever really surrenders territory to the other. There is a sphere or target of realist normality for

which Benjamin aims, and he hits it a number of times, thus partially assimilating into the X of the storyworld; but those assimilations are chronically nagged by the Y and (in particular) the erasure of fortune it places on the horizon. And our interest, as I've claimed, operates within exactly this dynamic. In some significant sense, then, the hybrid world goes beyond being just the context for its content and a method for its veracity and becomes the engine for the narrative itself, at least in experiential terms. If we prefer to conceive this more conservatively, the storyworld is such an essential part of Fitzgerald's design that we can neither experience nor talk about "Benjamin Button" without confronting the hybrid world and its implications.

iv. Experiential Affordances

Thus the question: for what purpose has Fitzgerald built his world? The hybrid world differs from the secondary world in that its realism precludes our experiencing secondary belief—in other words, *it just is* is not an option for explaining the extraordinary phenomenon. We have to deal with the violation *as* a violation, then, but how? We'll find, I think, a number of possible partial solutions, but they don't quite satisfy our needs.

Collecting "Benjamin Button" in *Tales of the Jazz Age*, Fitzgerald delineated the narrative's conceptual provenance:

This story was inspired by a remark of Mark Twain's to the effect that it was a pity that the best part of life came at the beginning and the worst part at the end. By trying the experiment upon only one man in a perfectly normal world I have scarcely given the idea a fair trial. (Brucoli 159)

There's some close-reading to be done even here. "Only one man in a perfectly normal world" has the author almost defining the hybrid world for us, which is nice, but to what extent does the story actually exercise Twain's contention? As we've seen, Benjamin's beginning is unpleasant as his end and his best middle years are a losing battle with his extraordinariness; therefore the

life presented here, rather than supporting or negating, engages Twain's idea only obliquely, if at all. The implication of "*scarcely* giving the idea a fair trial" by trying it on "only one man in a perfectly ordinary world" is that it'd be more productive to try it in various other contexts too, for instance one man in an extraordinary world or many men in an ordinary world. And indeed, if Fitzgerald's sole goal were to illustrate the principle that life starts better than it ends, he might've done better to build a secondary world that urges us toward the general. But he doesn't; he designs a story that is inseparable from its hybrid-world arrangement. This, as well as the fact that he hardly stays on the track of Twain's remark, suggests that while actual Fitzgerald might be truthfully relaying his *inspiration* for writing, the rhetorical objective of "Benjamin Button" is more complex than a reiteration or a test of the inspiring notion.

Fitzgerald gets double mileage out of some of the character reactions I've already discussed by layering social satire atop their world-building implications, and it's this satire that critics have often cited as the story's communicative content. In reference to "the way it mocks the pursuit of pleasure and status by the upper class," Sasser confidently writes, "'Benjamin Button' is clearly satirical in genre" (196). She outlines how, for instance, Doctor Keene, the nurses, Roger, and Roscoe all worry about their reputations being damaged by Benjamin, which she says satirizes their superficial preoccupation with image. I agree that satire is one of the effects Fitzgerald hopes we'll heed, but it isn't the whole of the design, and to read it as the central feature of the narrative is, I think, to naturalize the extraordinary in a manner that fails to do justice to the hybrid world. In other words, satirization here is primary-world work, gotten at through the referentiality of antebellum Baltimore and upperclass America, so reducing the story to satire at least partially neglects the structural complexity of the storyworld. This complexity is

evident in and inseparable from even the most obviously satirical moments such as the reactions Sasser cites, and we can locate it by examining their world-building effects alongside their social commentary. For example, above I read Keene's reaction as revealing his impulse to naturalize, but, as Sasser shows, it is simultaneously a satire of upperclass careerism: Keene must (at least subconsciously) believe there is a natural explanation for Benjamin if he fears blame, and to fear blame in the face of this extraordinary phenomenon is to expose values deserving of scorn. We can make a kindred claim about the townspeople's "ingenious" remark that Benjamin resembles his grandfather. Their initial puzzlement and the content of their decided compliment reinforce Benjamin's extraordinariness while the effort they expend on the way reveals their humorously superficial concern. Implied Fitzgerald permits and intends these multilayered effects, and, most importantly, neither is to undermine the other. Satire, then, is *partly* apt; it, like Fitzgerald's introductory reference to Twain, articulates something of the narrative's thematic or ideational concerns, but it doesn't do justice to the textual design in full.

There are a number of additional methods we could employ to discern thematic content in "Benjamin Button." Again unnatural narratology places a bid for its relevance, and it's perhaps true that Jan Alber's bin of reading strategies, from which we pulled in chapter two, contains tools of use to us here. Satire is there, as are allegory and "foregrounding the thematic," all reasonable interpretive options to test out—Fitzgerald purports to foreground Twain's theme, and it's plausible to find allegory in Benjamin's experience as a marked other in a world that resists, indeed forbids, his permanent success. I tend toward pluralism, and I would not object to a critic highlighting these features as salient parts of Fitzgerald's rhetorical objective. But allegorical and thematic reading are nonetheless exclusive in the way that Sasser's satirical reading is, partial

neglects of the extraordinary as extraordinary in a storyworld whose realism would seem to forbid it. For us the most responsible Alber strategy is the most subtle, what he calls “frame blending,” which entails “recombining, extending, or otherwise altering preexisting cognitive parameters” (*UN* 48). To interpret talking trees with frame blending, for example, we might pit our understanding of trees against our understanding of communicative species or speech acts more generally in hopes of producing a new “frame” or “schemata” that in turn refines our understanding of both. This sounds like the language I’ve been using to talk about the hybrid world, and in theory it seems a clever stance to adopt. Yet in practice what exactly does it yield? We could blend our frames for youth and age, imagining what it might mean to, for instance, start out jaded and progress to naive, and try to find light to throw on the concepts themselves. If successful such efforts could provide ideational insight like that of satire and allegory, and, moreover, frame blending at least acknowledges that there are seemingly disparate ontologies interacting in the storyworld. But that acknowledgment almost inevitably turns to diminution once we conduct a deliberate blending of frames that reduces the extraordinary to a combination of ordinary characteristics. Once again we’d lose sight of the world’s hybridity. The implication here is that there is a degree of frame blending that does and indeed should occur in hybrid-world reading as the inevitable result of the X/Y contrast—the extraordinary meets the ordinary and we witness the interaction of their features—and that it’s the extension of this process to the level of careful hermeneutic judgment that distorts it to reductiveness. In other words, we must intuitively blend frames in order to follow, understand, and enjoy a narrative like “Benjamin Button” to begin with, but adopting that process as a way to make the extraordinary scrutable is unsatisfactory because it tends toward betrayal of the ontological circumstances that incited the

intuitive frame-blend at the start. (To reiterate, I don't mean to imply that it's *wrong* to employ any of these strategies at various points in interpretation but only that they cannot suffice for a full assessment of the text.)

That reading a hybrid-world narrative entails intuitive frame-blending, however, brings me to precisely the point I wish to make. In terms of their default features, hybrid worlds, more than primary and secondary worlds, require that we shift our consideration from what the author is trying to *say* to what the author is trying to *do*—what experience, in short, he or she is putting us through. Authors of course build primary and secondary worlds to provide particular experiences too, but (clear in Smith and Rushdie) these experiences are likely to be steps toward ends, forces to encourage certain orientations toward the claims made in/by the text. It is the case that hybrid worlds likewise encourage certain orientations insofar as their realism urges us to apply actual-world parameters to an extraordinary phenomenon the actual world can't accommodate; but it is also the case that this arrangement creates a sort of stubbornness, first in our actual-world understanding's inability to understand and thence in the incompleteness of any interpretation that eludes that inability by reducing the extraordinary to purely thematic material. So we're stuck, having reached this hermeneutic impasse, with the experience of being there itself. In this way, hybrid-world narratives naturally grant the experience of the storyworld a rhetorical prominence, suggesting that it's less a means to an end than the site of an end itself. I don't mean that *all we have* is experience but that it's to the experience we must look for the author's purpose, rather than to where the experience points us (e.g. the general, the particular). To phrase it in the form of a question, what are we being asked to take away from this stubborn hermeneutic situation and our endurance of it? In answering this question some hybrid-world

narratives might ultimately resolve into a claim, but many others will not; in any case, though, the experience is an indispensable aspect of our evaluation.

Above, where I initially define the hybrid world, I briefly sketch the default qualities of its experience, and it'd probably be useful to reiterate them as I summarize the subsequent additions and complete the delineation here. The central experiential condition of the hybrid-world form is that an otherwise realist context forces us to apply our authorial consciousness's actual-world understanding to a phenomenon that violates that understanding. A tension surfaces between the consciousnesses stemming from the puzzling discordance between what we witness and what we believe is possible in the storyworld. Neither the realism nor the extraordinary phenomenon resolves into the other, that is, the world turns out to be neither primary nor secondary but remains in between. We're troubled. Needing to address how and why such an extraordinary phenomenon could transpire in such an ordinary world, we may make some sense by attributing it to satire, metaphor, or another figurative device—in Landy's terms, what we glean here is taught content. This is good work, the *necessity* of which too is an important condition of the hybrid world; but a perceptive reading can't be fully satisfied by it because it leaves untended and unresolved the extraordinariness of the phenomenon. Yet, as I've said, the *X/Y precludes* the extraordinary's full resolution by both refusing a natural explanation (primary) and prohibiting the positing of alternate laws (secondary). What we're left with is the conflict itself, the sensation of throwing our authorial consciousness's actual-world parameters at something they can't accommodate and noticing the nature of the collision (the intuitive frame-blending I referenced before). The hybrid-world story places us in a destabilized reality whereby one of the *données of our world* is transgressed before our reading eyes, indeed in a kind of trial.

The choice to build a hybrid world is thus the choice to give the reader an experience during which she will feel her basic assumptions called into question and be unable to retreat to either of the more comfortable sides, the primary or the secondary world. And as assumptions are called into question there comes an opportunity to see them more clearly for what they really are. So, Fitzgerald chooses a hybrid world—as opposed to, say, a secondary world in which reverse aging is the norm—less to make a *claim* about aging than to force us to *look at* our fundamental assumptions about age and youth through the illuminating microscope of transgression.

Stimulation and provocation, then, are built into the very fabric of the arrangement—though it will not unanimously be the case, the rhetorical purposes of hybrid-world narratives tend to be situated within the *defamiliarization* inherent in their hybridity. We might usefully consider the defamiliarization that results from ontological transgression in relation to *ostranenie*, or “enstrangment,” in Viktor Shklovsky’s sense. According to Shklovsky, art is a “device” that “exists in order to restore the sensation of life . . . in order to *make a stone stony*” (162, my emphasis). By casting in a new light or simply by paying new attention to the world, art makes us “see as if for the first time” elements of reality that we tend otherwise to overlook or to (erroneously) take for granted as long mastered and understood. When a poet renders a spoon in verse it’s plausible we’ll notice something about spoons that lay dormant beforehand; thus, in a modest way, reading the poem better acquaints us with what our world really is. Shklovsky is speaking generally about art and, likewise, rhetorical theorists such as Phelan frequently argue for narrative’s general capacity to (if skillfully executed) challenge what we think we know about the world. To be sure, Zadie Smith’s realism makes us see anew the West’s racial and ethnic history, and Salman Rushdie’s fantasy illuminates the massive

operational scale of the principles violated by the fatwa. But amidst the general applicability of the concept the hybrid world has a uniquely acute and salient relation to “enstrangement,” albeit one that flips, so to speak, the original direction of the light it throws. I want to suggest that the hybrid world’s violation of our laws actually forces us to “see as if for the first time” those violated laws for what they are—to “restore the sensation of life” governed by precisely the parameter(s) that the extraordinary phenomenon transgresses. What we experience in a hybrid world are the consequences of a fundamental law’s lapse in an otherwise controlled, realist context, and enduring this experience all but guarantees to *reveal via contrast* a clearer picture of the living condition effected by the law in the actual world. In other words, these Christina V. Bruns’s, “When a process that seems natural or automatic appears to fail, an examination of that failure can disclose elements of the process that usually remain invisible” (354). Obviously the takeaways will vary by text, but at the very least hybrid-world narratives subject us to an interaction between an extraordinary phenomenon and our ordinary modes of understanding the world. Such narratives thus exercise an *inherent*, very nearly *inevitable* tendency to challenge, reform, or reinforce what we think, value, and believe—and they do so not by *telling* us but by letting us feel our way through the hybridity. I’ll forego trying to articulate a particular revelation that issues from “Benjamin Button” in favor of underscoring the more important point:

Fitzgerald builds a hybrid world to “enstrange” his reader from the laws of aging and thereby to force that reader to reevaluate, consciously or unconsciously, his or her perception of age, youth, and the bridge between them in the actual world. Generally speaking, it’s via this process of defamiliarization or “enstrangement” that hybrid worlds influence our understanding of the actual world.

But there is an additional benefit of this experience that we might say goes on *beneath* the acquisition of a newfound perspective. In *How to Do Things with Fictions*, theorist Joshua Landy locates a class of texts—*The Canterbury Tales*, the Gospel of Mark, Plato’s dialogues, Mallarmé’s lyrics, Beckett’s trilogy—that he argues “don’t teach by means of their content” but “train by means of their form.” The affordances of such texts are structural and experiential and can only be articulated in terms of the capacities they hone. For instance, with *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, Beckett offers us “not a reservoir of information but a spiritual exercise,” a “formal model for the dissolution of philosophical questions” that, through repeated pairings of assertion-and-negation (“je ne peux pas continuer, je vais continuer”), eventually lets “peace enter in” as we “grasp, of the unknowable, that it can never be known” (138-144). Or, less abstractly, in Plato it’s often less important to glean the wisdom of the lesson than *to have undergone* the processual, dialogical journey thereto. I’d like to think that *all* quality literature exercises us to some degree, but Landy’s point is that “a finite set” of texts, particularly ones as recalcitrant as Beckett’s novels, Mallarmé’s poems, and the parables of Mark’s Jesus, foreground their “training” and background their “teaching”; their dominant quality and foremost virtue is their experience rather than their argument. I don’t want to conflate my theoretical model with his, and I want to claim neither that all hybrid worlds are training-dominant nor that all training-

dominant texts are hybrid worlds. But I do propose that for a moment we consider the experience of hybrid worlds in these terms of Landy's.¹⁹

A study beyond the present scope, one that surveyed, say, dozens of hybrid-world narratives, would doubtless reveal that many authors take obvious positions in regard to the assumptions their storyworlds destabilize. However, in some cases ("Benjamin Button," I think, being one of them), the ultimate verdict or argument might be inconclusive—we'll have our destabilization and what it forces us to notice, and that will seem to be the limit of the rhetorical objective. I want to suggest, with the help of Landy, that even in the most unproductive of such cases—those either inscrutable, agnostic, or uninteresting in their apparent proposition—the hybridity of the storyworld contains within it the potential to offer us, on a subterranean level, a profitable encounter. (The realization of that potential is of course not guaranteed but depends on various other factors such as aesthetic execution.) What I mean, ultimately, is that hybrid worlds do have a uniquely poignant ability to influence what we believe and value, but even if that influence nets no articulable gain (if we can discern no proposition being made about the world), a well-constructed hybrid-world narrative can still provide us the valuable experience of our assumptions being destabilized. *Valuable*: as we go through what I've called the "hermeneutic impasse," the discomfiting intrusion of the impossible into realism, the collision of actual-world understandings and extraordinary phenomena, the "enstrangement" from and "first sight" of the

¹⁹ To talk about Beckett, Mallarmé, Plato, Chaucer, and Mark in terms of world-building is far, far outside the scope of this study, because they raise a number of useful but difficult questions about world-building in general. We'd have to attend, for instance, to the common belief that lyric poems do not project fictional worlds (Mallarmé), the possibility that Beckett at his most inscrutable projects no world at all, the absolute realism required for a philosophical dialogue (Plato), the conventions of medieval poetry that loosen our ontological laws (Chaucer), and the controversial and complicated nature of belief in scripture in general (Mark). My point is that Landy hits on an important principle, and it's equivalence with that principle I'm after, not an equation of our enterprises. Nevertheless, the problems that Landy's five writers pose to storyworld study can and should be addressed in world-building terms eventually.

transgressed law, the conscious or unconscious reevaluation of our preconceptions, and all else that comprises the challenge of the hybrid-world form, we simultaneously sharpen our capacity to undergo such challenges. Or, hybrid worlds are unrelenting challenges that *train us for instances of being challenged*—“uniquely propitious training-grounds,” as Landy puts it (12). This paragraph is my pitch for including hybrid-world narratives in that “finite set of texts” whose processes whet our cognitive or intellectual dexterity in practical ways, even as we remain aware of what they’re potentially leading us to recognize about our world.

I use the word “practical” in the sense of “relating to practice or action, as opposed to speculation or theory” (OED 1) deliberately to signal what I believe to be the relevance of the hybrid-world experience to our active lives in the actual world. In some ways that relevance might be obvious, banal or cliché even (“think outside the box!”), but a glance at two seminal renderings of historical progress will elucidate the stakes’ immensity. If we take Hegel’s view, the ideological drives the material so that history is the idea in its ever-evolving form; as literary scholars well know, for dominant ideas to evolve they must be tested, pressured, seen for what they are *with their deficiencies*. Then we can revise or swap them for better ones and progress. While hybrid-world narratives won’t *necessarily* pressure any particular idea, the experience they provide will *always* simulate the process whereby held convictions are challenged and reformed. Alternatively, the Marxian view flips Hegel on his head, arguing that ideology is determined by a culture’s materiality; thus, for Marx, history is the progression of technology, working and domestic conditions, and other concrete realities that in turn mould the ideas of the people. This philosophy would seem to undermine the importance of any regimental interrogation of our assumptions: the material formed our ideology from without anyway, and

our ideas will change when the world does. I'm oversimplifying, but I'm doing so intentionally in order to say that *even if* Marxian materialism saps the idea of its historical agency, the destabilization of reality is still a relevant and valuable experience. For if ideology is a product of materiality then, in a sense, our ideas play catchup, or they're left responding and *adjusting* to the conditions we've been accosted with ahead of our understanding. Therefore, historical change, essential tenet of long-term existence, places us in precisely the destabilized reality I've been carrying on about. Again the hybrid-experience simulates a crucial actual-world experience, this time on the responsive or defensive against the evolution of the material. Yes, we can conceive it thus: if we follow Hegel, hybrid worlds help us on our *offensive* progression through time, while if we follow Marx, hybrid worlds help us fortify our *defensive* stance against the changes time bestows upon us.

. . .

What is literature supposed to do to us? And what are supposed to do with literature? As Landy puts it, "Rather a lot, it turns out" (4). I've examined in this chapter what I consider to be a prototypical hybrid-world specimen, with a resiliently realist world and a single unresolvable extraordinary phenomenon. I've tried to elucidate the experience and rhetorical effect of the hybrid world in its pure form: an extraordinary phenomenon cuts across an otherwise realist world, bolstering the authorial consciousness then violating its understanding, which stirs up a tension in the reading mind; interpretive action is necessary to parse how and why an extraordinary phenomenon has occurred in an ordinary world, but that action cannot fully resolve the phenomenon, and the reader is left confronting destabilized presumptions and undergoing the challenge of destabilization. But I want to make a concluding note about complexity and

variation. There is, as I see it, no reason to avoid mining hybrid-world narratives for their “teachable content.” Indeed, many examples are sure to be filled to the brim with claims and lessons, and it’s doubtless their authors’ hope that we’d heed them. My point in turning attention away from content toward process is that the challenging experience hybrid worlds provide is *inherent* in the form of the construction itself—if it seems absent, it’s likely due to aesthetic failure or to the hybridity leaning toward the primary or secondary side. Hence, the experiential characteristics explicated here are the invariables, the defining features of the hybrid world in default form, and any content-based reading that doesn’t account for them cannot be considered complete. At the same time, defaults exist to be inventively subverted; different authors have different goals and different texts place different demands on us, and any study of hybrid-world building that doesn’t account for that variation cannot be considered complete. Of course, endless as the inventory is, a study of fictional worlds is never complete. Nonetheless, there is a plethora of texts just before or just beyond Fitzgerald’s hybrid world, ones that tweak the prototype to different experiential effects, and we should look, if briefly, at some examples thereof. In my conclusion I’ll discuss how the model I’ve put forth so far can help us to understand three such texts.

Conclusion: Onward and Outward

Strangenesses, yeah. It's just that idea that the world, the things that we have always thought of as the rules of the world—you know, the way things are and how things work—don't seem to operate anymore. And all this crazy stuff has come in. And how do we understand it? How do we deal with it? And how do we live with that?

—Salman Rushdie in 2015 interview
with PBS NewsHour

In the words of David Herman, “Prototypical instances of a given category will be good (= easily recognized and named) examples of it, whereas more peripheral instances will display less goodness-of-fit” (9). In this essay I’ve assayed prototypical instances of the primary world, the secondary world, and the hybrid world in an effort to elucidate the baseline experiential offerings of those arrangements and to build atop that baseline readings of my particular test cases that illuminate the sorts of rhetorical objectives that lend themselves most naturally to each kind of world. But there are *many* of what Herman calls “peripheral instances,” texts that “display less goodness-of-fit” with the default categorical features exemplified in *White Teeth*, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, and “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button.” Each peripheral instance, moreover, is built with a kind of peripheral purpose: any degree of hybridity, for example, will provide some destabilization of our assumptions, even if, in order to stress the universality of its thematics, its author abandons realism more than Fitzgerald does in “Benjamin Button.” There are, we can safely presume, nearly endless possibilities for building a world, endless such adjustments to the principles I’ve laid out in this thesis.

And therein lies what I believe to be the thesis’s value. The foundation of my theoretical model is a continuum on which, I posit, every narrative that evokes a world can be fixed. It extends infinitely in either direction so that storyworlds can become less and less or more and

more like the actual world both as we think about more texts (and more media) in terms of their worlds and as creators continue to push the limits of world-building procedures (though it's possible that at some point a world would cease to be fictional on the primary end and cease to be a world at all on the secondary end). Thus what I've tried to do is outline a framework for talking about storyworlds, how and why they're built, what they're like to inhabit for a time, and how they affect what we do with and take away from literary narrative itself. It's plausible that a given study's worth is best measured not by the definitiveness of its conclusions but by the quality and quantity of the questions it provokes for further study. My hope is that, by articulating what happens toward the poles and the center, the readings I've conducted will encourage attention to other parts of the storyworld continuum; furthermore, I hope that the theoretical apparatus I use for such articulations provides a useful approach with which to begin.

Such a moving-forth might start with those genres, such as ghost, vampire, or zombie stories, whose very premises entail manipulated ontologies but which by convention maintain a forthright connection to the actual world. Glen Duncan has said of Colson Whitehead's zombie-dystopia *Zone One*, for instance, that it forces the reader to "see the strangeness of the familiar and the familiarity of the strange"—undoubtedly, if implicitly, a claim about the novel's world. *Zone One* begins after a nebulous "plague" has afflicted most of the world's population and turned them to zombies. The "Zone" of the title refers to Manhattan island below Canal Street, and the story follows protagonist-survivor Mark Spitz and his crew through a three-day effort to clear the Zone of straggler zombies (or "skels") left behind by the military's more extensive cleanup operation. As the setting suggests, Whitehead retains realism, employing referentiality, extra-representational statements, and various other strategies to establish a connection to the

actual world. But that realism is severely complicated by the plague and the zombies, which are the narrative's central instability and which, by violating the finality of death, count as degree-one extraordinary phenomena. A sort of hybridity, then. The world's extraordinariness is compounded by the temporal distance typical of dystopian fiction; this distance estranges us epistemologically by engaging a swath of storyworld time over which our authorial consciousness cannot claim authority, and we therefore lose some confidence in our actual-world parameters. At the same time, however, the rhetorical power of dystopia often depends on our understanding the dystopian future as having developed out of our authorial present. Indeed, as Adam Stock has argued, a significant portion of our interest in such narratives surrounds our effort to connect the storyworld's present to an actual-world present, to explain "how the dystopian state came to be"—in effect, to bridge the gap between the narrative and authorial consciousnesses. Nonetheless, it seems the extraordinary prevails: the first line of *Zone One* is the referential "He'd always wanted to live in New York," but by the end it has metamorphosed into, "He'd also wanted to live in New York *but that city didn't exist anymore*" (320, my emphasis). "Let the cracks between things widen," Mark Spitz decides, "things" of course meaning the pre- and post-plague worlds. By arriving at this conclusion Whitehead partially releases his hold on realism and places his storyworld somewhere between the hybrid and secondary points on the continuum. What is it like to read a narrative that exercises so complexly the relation of present to future, ordinary to extraordinary? What rhetorical purpose might that exercise serve?

Also especially relevant are those storyworlds that remain perched, for one reason or another, between natural and supernatural explanations for extraordinary phenomena—or,

Todorov's *fantastic*. A number of critics, for example Brian McHale and James Phelan, have cited Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* as one such narrative. The narration in *Lot 49* "represents," in McHale's words, "the mediating consciousness of [protagonist] Oedipa and through her the happenings of the fictional world," which means that only through the subjective filter of Oedipa do we readers have access to the storyworld (*PF* 24). First Pynchon establishes a significant connection to the actual world by deploying early and consistent expository references such as California, Cornell, Jay Gould, and Perry Mason, showing Oedipa in touch with what Phelan calls "a generally recognizable mimetic world" ("Mimetic Protagonist" 197). But throughout the story Oedipa has "all manner of revelations" about Tristero, the underground postal system that suggests itself at every turn, which progressively destabilizes her sense of reality so that the innocuous confusion and curiosity she begins with ultimately develop into an overall hallucinatory paranoia. At times it approaches pure solipsism: "Oedipa, to retaliate, stopped believing in them" (96). Hence, because our access to the narrative is mediated through Oedipa's consciousness, we too lose track of what's real and what's imagined and therefore what is and is not an empirical feature of the storyworld. In this way Pynchon places us, along with Oedipa, atop the story's governing binary: "Either Tristero did exist, in its own right, or it was being presumed, perhaps fantasied by Oedipa" (88). That we can't confidently decide which is true drives McHale to call *Lot 49* an instance of the fantastic. In this paper's terms, however, there's a problem with treating Pynchon's novel as if it approaches what McHale calls an "alternative reality," a problem that critics seem often to ignore—namely that Tristero, even if it is real, *isn't an extraordinary phenomenon*. It's a *mail service*, and while it's understandable that it bemuses Oedipa so, it's no more a *violation* of reality than are fictive but possible persons and

locations. Nor, indeed, do either of the novel's oft-quoted lines take us any closer to extraordinariness: "*Shall I project a world?*" merely underlines Oedipa's penchant for solipsism, and in context "another world's intrusion into this one" seems more about revolution, a subversive idea's infiltration of hegemonic structure, than any actual "miracle" in the empirical sense. This is true even of Oedipa's most intense moments of anxiety, which, though sometimes cased in secondary-world language or sentiment, still center on less-than-extraordinary hypotheticals: "For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by US Mail . . . there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world" (101). The mundaneness of this distressing prospect and the breadth of the leap from avoiding US Mail to multiple worlds suggest that we're approaching satire of this paranoia; indeed, even Oedipa herself wonders "why the chance of [Tristero] being real should menace her so" (107). In *any* case, then, the confirmed *and* potential phenomena of *Lot 49* transgress no actual-world laws, and in this light the storyworld belongs between the hybrid and primary points of the continuum. This placement is beneficial because it accounts for or even foregrounds the actual world to which *Lot 49* accords—that is, 1960s America, troubled as it is by (in Phelan's words) "a general and growing suspicion of authority and a growing uncertainty about the relation between what government officials and other powerful people told their publics and the truth" (193). Pynchon builds an ultimately realist world with an unsettled presentation to portray Oedipa as a function of and contributor to this referential paranoid climate.

Some texts make it explicit that human action initiated extraordinary phenomena and thus turned the storyworld hybrid, and some, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, even *represent* that process in the narrative. The first half of Shelley's novel is about Doctor Frankenstein's

effort to assert his power over nature and make life in a lab out of raw materials; the second half is about the repercussions of Frankenstein's success, as his "monster" is mentally and physically far beyond humans and goes on to wreak terrible havoc because Frankenstein can neither control the monster nor honor its requests. Before Frankenstein creates the monster the storyworld is by all signs primary, after the monster is alive the world is hybrid, and the creation itself is the hinge between the designations: Frankenstein's success transgresses actual-world reality.²⁰ Narratives that represent humans willfully altering the nature of the world (and to bad effect) are especially poignant because, with their resultant hybrid-world powers of destabilization and defamiliarization, they force us to notice our role in the world's construction and our power to manipulate it for better or worse. Articulating *Frankenstein* as progressing via human agency from one point of the storyworld continuum to another helps us to understand how it pertains to a very real and pressing aspect of our condition.

Pressing, yes. Consider this sentence from MIT physicist Max Tegmark: "This makes it absolutely crucial that human AI controllers develop good governance to avoid disastrous pitfalls" (181). What did Doctor Frankenstein do but *fail* to "develop good governance" and thus *enable* "disastrous pitfalls"? What do we glean from that fictive failure but exactly what Tegmark demands that we heed? Of course Tegmark's nonfiction book on artificial intelligence, *Life 3.0*, resonates in talk of *Frankenstein*, but I think that correlation also gestures toward a greater germaneness of a world-building study to our lives in the actual world. Considering the rate at which technology develops and the particular projects underway,²¹ it's plausible that reality in

²⁰ This assessment is complicated by the frame-narrative structure of the novel as a whole. I'm referring to the world as represented in Frankenstein's tale to Captain Walton.

²¹ See, in addition to Tegmark's book, Daugherty and Wilson's *Human + Machine*, Bostrum's *Superintelligence*, Barrat's *Our Final Invention*, Husain's *The Sentient Machine*.

the coming decade(s) will be infiltrated by phenomena that now or a decade ago or a decade before that we (or at least laypeople, nonscientists) would have considered impossible or extraordinary. For some people that might already be the case: in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for instance, one can catch a ride to work in an *unmanned* Uber car. I won't at this farewell be so fanciful as to fully equate the experience of reading about a fictive AI to the experience of confronting one in the actual world. But great literature *does* have the capacity to influence what we think, believe, and value about our lives, and if (as in this study) that influence pertains to our world itself—destabilizing it, reinforcing it, illuminating its most fundamental and universal features—then we inevitably emerge better equipped to confront what's ordinary *or* extraordinary to come. Indeed, the start of making meaning out of a new reality might be learning to make meaning out of the motley lot of worlds lying around us—on our shelves, in our libraries, and (let it remain) before our reading eyes.

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